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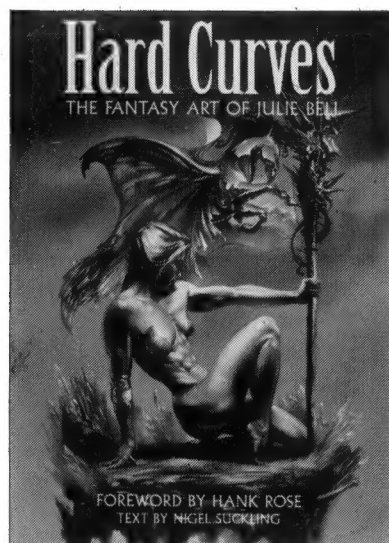
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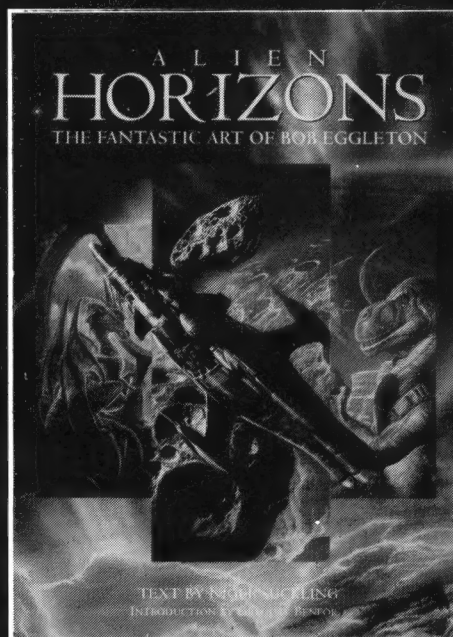


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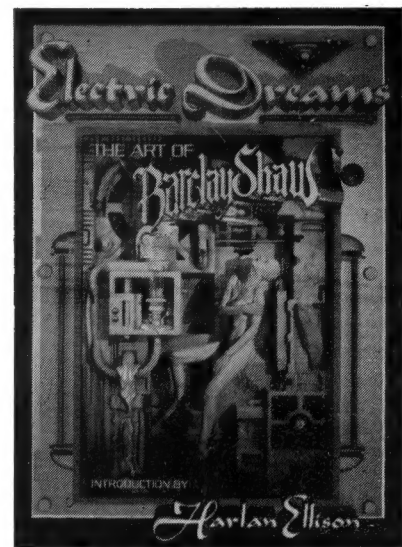
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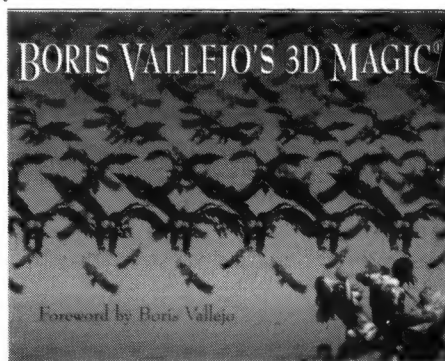
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Cover by Maurizio Manzieri (see photograph caption on page 5)

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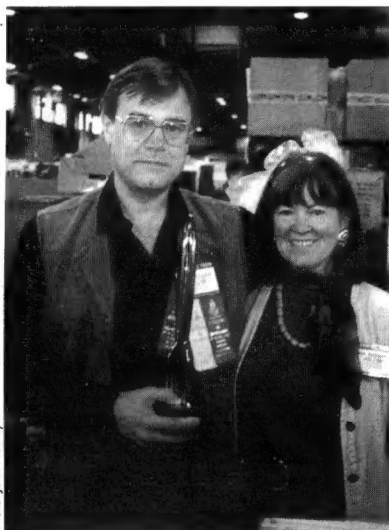
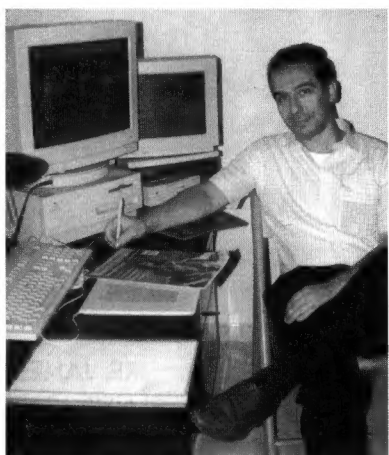


Photo: John Heaney

Here is another picture of your proud editor with his Hugo award, accompanied by his wife, Ann – who, besides being subscriptions secretary of *Interzone*, is a flamenco dancer extraordinaire.



This is Maurizio Manzieri, the artist who supplied the illustration for this month's cover and for issue 99, along with the equipment on which he created the pictures. Needless to say, they are Apple Macintoshes, and he has also sent us an Italian cyberpunk fanzine, *Delos*, on diskette.



Interaction

Dear Editors:

Of course science fiction isn't dead or dying ("Interface," *IZ* 100). A French reader can't help but laugh at the idea that a British citizen can even begin to think such a thing. Proof that science fiction is very much alive: it survives in France, despite all signs to the contrary! The number of sf books published on this side of the Channel has been steadily decreasing for 20 years now, reduced to a mere 150 books a year (including fantasy – not a lot – and spinofferies, but excluding horror – 70 titles a year). The French sf market is now too small to be worth bothering with, to paraphrase Brian Stableford ... and yet, there are still some good sf lines, and a bunch of various other titles published. There are even two strong small-press publishers, well distributed (Encrage – which recently published a "best of *Interzone*" anthology, *Century XXI*, by the way! – and DLM), a recent book-magazine (*CyberDreams*), and a yearly small-press anthology (*Destination Crépuscule*). And there's word of another magazine, to be launched in April '96 (*Galaxies*). Of course, the circulations are quite small: around 8,000 for most of the books, around 1,000 for the small-press publications – and only 150 for my own fiction and news fanzine, *Yellow Submarine* (the oldest one in France with 12 years and 116 issues behind it!). But, nevertheless, science fiction is still alive in France.

Even better, French-speaking sf is now in a kind of small renaissance, after two decades of falling apart and two devastating movements (the so-called "Political SF" and "New-Formalist"): despite the scarcity of outlets, new and interesting writers find a way to publish lots of excellent books – Ayerdhal, Pierre Bordage, Richard Canal, Maurice Dantec or Serge Lehman, are examples of authors who will shortly have nothing more to envy in the best of British science fiction. Of course, they aren't translated into English. But that's another problem: no English-language sf publisher, be it in the USA or in Great Britain, seems to understand that there's a whole world of literature outside the English-speaking one. A pity, that: to speak of communication with outer space and not be able to communicate with fellow Earthmen... For example, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* barely speaks of the two main French

writers of sf, Michel Jeury (his only book translated into English – *Chronolysis*, Macmillan – sadly forgotten by the *Encyclopedia*) and Serge Brussolo. Both are widely translated in the whole world, but not in English. In fact, the only modern French sf writer available in your language is the Canadian citizen Elisabeth Vonarburg – one of our best writers, of course, but one author is hardly enough to represent the French forms of the genre today.

Congratulations on the 100th issue of *Interzone* – and on a well-earned Hugo Award! Keep on the good work. Particularly, keep working on the layout, better and better thanks to Paul Brazier, and on the quality of the inside illustrations – always the low point in *IZ*. SMS is a good choice, and *IZ* needs more of this kind of good artist.

André-Francois Ruaud
Lyon, France

Editor: The existence of a French "best of *Interzone*" anthology, called *Century XXI*, is news to us: we knew nothing of it. Sometimes, alas, France seems a million miles away; so it's good to hear from you, M. Ruaud. I'm sorry to learn of the recent publishing difficulties of French sf – particularly in view of the fact that France was the nation which invented sf in the first place. (Yes, I've been reading Marc Angenot's essays in *Science-Fiction Studies* over the years.) It is not only the work of Jules Verne that allows France to claim the invention of sf, but the remarkable series of proto-sf "firsts" which appeared in that country during the century preceding Verne: *L'An 2440* (The Year 2440) by Louis Sebastien Mercier (1771), the first futuristic utopia; *Les Posthumes* (Posthumous Letters) by Restif de la Bretonne (1802), perhaps the earliest far-future cosmic voyage; *Le Dernier homme* (The Last Man) by Jean-Baptiste Cousin de Grainville (1805), the first "dying earth" story; *Le Roman de l'avenir* (The Novel of the Future) by Félix Bodin (1834), an early attempt at a realistic novel of tomorrow complete with a built-in theory of sf – Bodin called it "littérature futuriste"; *Napoléon et la conquête du monde* (Napoleon and the Conquest of the World) by Louis Geoffroy (1836; later republished as *Napoléon apocryphe*), the first alternative history; *Le Monde tel qu'il sera* (The World As It Will Be) by Emile Souvestre (1846), the first

futuristic dystopia; Star ou Psi de Cassiopée (Star, or Psi Cassiopeia) by C. I. Defontenay (1854), the first detailed evocation in fiction of an alien solar system; Paris avant les hommes (Paris Before Men) by Pierre Boitard (1861), the first prehistoric romance of apemen. And so on.

As Marc Angenot said over a decade ago, Jules Verne was simply the first best-seller in this nascent genre of scientific romance – and he (and his shrewd publisher) achieved that distinction in part by damping down the wilder speculations of his predecessors: Verne, in effect, “tamed” French sf, obliterated its past, domesticated it, and made it acceptable to a wide international readership. He was the Michael Crichton of his day. Years after Angenot pointed all this out, and as if in vindication of his thesis, it’s fascinating to learn that a “lost” Jules Verne novel has come to light: Paris au XXe siècle (Paris in the 20th Century, 1994), written in 1863, just after Five Weeks in a Balloon, but rejected by Verne’s publisher, Hetzel, as being too imaginative, too far-out, too futuristic, for a growing readership that wanted exciting stories of big machines and extraordinary travels set in the here and now... So forget Mary Shelley, forget Edgar Allan Poe: it was the French that invented sf – and you can be proud.

Dear Editors:

I’ve been thinking about your comparison between the history of the western and science fiction (“Interface,” IZ 99). There is obviously an analogy – in my youth, our public library had roughly equal numbers of both. But I feel a better comparison would be with the detective story, which also dates from the same era – Wilkie Collins, Edgar Allan Poe, Conan Doyle, etc. There is obviously no lack of modern examples, and no sign of the detective genre drying up. In fact, I suspect that the crime/thriller field probably outnumbered all but sex-and-shopping in paperback sales (depending, of course, on whether you include Jeffrey Archer!). The reason is clear: crime writers can adapt to changes in society, while western writers are restricted to a specific era and country. Similarly, most sf manages to move with the times, and so can (one hopes) avoid being trapped in any particular niche.

On the other hand, there is one genre which might well go the way of the western. Fantasy has at least as long a history as sf – far longer, if you go back to *The Faerie Queene* or *Le Morte d’Arthur*. But it seems to have very little room for development. Most modern fantasy depends on either *The Lord of the Rings* or *Conan the Barbarian*, with a few echoes of William Morris and Lord Dunsany. The only

new fantasy idea I can think of in this generation is Pratchett’s Discworld, which started as a parody of Leiber’s Fafhrd/Gray Mouser stories (however much it has since grown). Unless some new direction can be found, I can well believe that modern fantasy might suddenly crash. Speaking personally, I gave up buying it several years ago after mistakenly purchasing one of Terry Brooks’s novels.

The only other genre likely to be of interest to *Interzone* readers is the ghost story/horror field. This has the longest pedigree of all, and has certainly changed with the times. One would have expected the supernatural element to be fading away, but if anything it seems to be growing: perhaps the decline in formal religion has allowed more emphasis on demons without their traditional opposing powers? In line with films and TV, horror fiction has grown more and more violent and blood-soaked, continually pressing the boundary of what is currently acceptable. Indeed, it is hard to imagine how much further this development can go; but no doubt there are authors working on this at the moment!

All in all, the future of sf is at least dimly lit, rather than totally dark. Undoubtedly there will be changes, but *Interzone* has a good chance of keeping on going for another 100 issues.

Jim Moyles
Crowthorne, Berks.

Editor: Thanks for your faith in science fiction, and in *Interzone*’s prospects. At the risk of sounding repetitious, I’d like to say – forget Wilkie Collins, forget Edgar Allan Poe: it was the French that invented detective fiction (or le roman policier). Collins, Poe, even Dickens to a limited extent, were certainly “precursors,” but the genre didn’t coalesce as a genre in the public perception until a certain Frenchman put pen to paper. His name was Emile Gaboriau, and his first bestselling novel, *L’Affaire Lerouge*, appeared in 1865, to be followed swiftly by several others, most of them featuring the detective Monsieur Lecoq whose fame waxed mightily. As you will observe from the date, Gaboriau’s success was almost exactly contemporaneous with that of Jules Verne, and it proved to be equally international (though less enduring: nobody seems to read Gaboriau now). In late-19th-century Britain and America (before the Conan Doyle/Sherlock Holmes craze of the ‘90s) the crime novel was widely referred to in the press as “the Gaboriau novel,” and Doyle himself was influenced strongly by Gaboriau. All this is explained in a commendable but rather neglected book by R. F. Stewart called ...And Always a Detective: Chapters in the History of Detective Fiction (David & Charles, 1980).

So, to come to the point, sf and crime fiction are of the same age, and therefore – if the thesis I put forward in my editorial on the western has any validity – they are probably at the same stage in their respective internal developments as genres.

As for fantasy, it is very young as a mass-market genre: you’re spot-on when you imply that it began with J. R. R. Tolkien and Robert E. Howard. In fact, it began with their paperback reissues in the 1960s. Before that, there was no fantasy category in the market place – ask any book publisher with a long enough memory. But in another sense, of course, fantasy is as old as the hills. Each era has produced its own brand of fantasy – the ancient Greeks had it, the Middle Ages had it in the form of the Arthurian cycle (and much else), and the Renaissance had it in the form of the “chivalric romances” (e.g. the Spanish Amadis of Gaul, the 16th century’s most popular work of prose fiction, which spawned countless sequels by other hands, spinoffs, etc). Fantasy is protean; and it seems fantasy will always out. You may be right about the immediate prospects for the post-Tolkien/Howard brand of fantasy; it has already enjoyed a 30-year run, and it may “suddenly crash” – but I rather suspect that some other form of fantasy will replace it (and maybe this is already happening, with Terry Pratchett). As for horror fiction, well, I could maunder on about the 18th-century Gothic novel – but I think I’ll stop here, for reasons of space!

Dear Editors:

Many congratulations on the well-deserved Hugo, and on reaching issue 100 at the same time. Nice cover too! I think you are entitled to highlight your achievement by listing other British sf/fantasy magazines which have been and mostly gone in the same period, none managing more than a third of the number of issues.

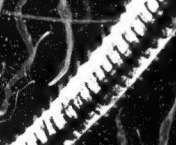
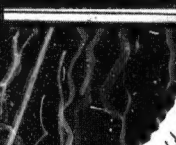
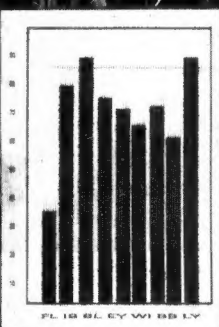
However, it isn’t only Chris Reed who dislikes the term “fiction fanzine.” Small zines which concentrate on fiction prefer to be called “small press.” Of course, it’s a term which could be used for almost any publication not belonging to a conglomerate, and no one would expect you to list every item which had ever carried fiction. On the other hand, the frankly unhelpful attitude of people who do identify themselves as sf fanzine publishers justifies the use of a separate term. Most of these insist that fanzines should never carry fiction, and that all fan fiction is by definition crap. This attitude was evident in the 1970s, when your research shows there was often no paying market for short sf in the UK, and persists to this day. How many fanzine review columns mention fiction zines

Interaction continues on page 29



SILVER FIRE

by
GREG EGAN



I was in my office at home, grading papers for Epidemiology 410, when the call came through from John Brecht in Maryland. Realtime, not a polite message to be dealt with whenever I chose. I'd grown into the habit of thinking of Colonel Brecht as "my old boss." Apparently that had been premature.

He said, "We've found a little Silver Fire anomaly which I think might interest you, Claire. A little blip on the auto-correlation transform which just won't go away. And seeing as you're on vacation –"

"My students are on vacation. I still have work to do."

"Oh, I think Columbia can find someone to take over those menial tasks for a week or two."

I regarded him in silence for a moment, trying to decide whether or not to tell him to find someone else to take over his own *menial tasks*.

I said, "What exactly are we talking about?"

Brecht smiled. "A faint trail. Hovering on the verge of significance. Your speciality." A map appeared on the screen; his face shrunk to an inset. "It seems to start in North Carolina, around Greensboro, heading west." The map was peppered with dots marking the locations of recent Silver Fire cases – colour-coded by the time elapsed since a notional "day of infection", the dots themselves positioned wherever the patient had been at the time. Having been told exactly what to look for, I could just make out a vague spectral progression cutting through the scattered blossoms of localized outbreaks: a kind of smudged rainbow trail from red to violet, dissolving into uncertainty just west of Knoxville, Tennessee. Then again... if I squinted, I could discern another structure, about as convincing, sweeping down in an amazingly perfect arc from Kentucky. A few more minutes, and I'd see the hidden face of Groucho Marx. The human brain is far too good at finding patterns; without rigorous statistical tools we're helpless, animists grasping at meaning in every random puff of air.

I said, "So how do the numbers look?"

"The P value's borderline," Brecht conceded. "But I still think it's worth checking out."

The visible part of this hypothetical trail spanned at least ten days. *Three days* after exposure to the virus, the average person was either dead or in intensive care – not driving blithely across the countryside. Maps tracing the precise routes of infection generally looked like random walks with mean free paths five or ten kilometres long; even air travel, at worst, tended to spawn a multitude of scattered small outbreaks. If we'd stumbled on someone who was infectious but asymptomatic, then that was definitely *worth checking out*.

Brecht said, "As of now, you have full access to the notifications database. I'd offer you our provisional analysis – but I'm sure you can do better with the raw data, yourself."

"No doubt."

"Good. Then you can leave tomorrow."

I woke before dawn and packed in ten minutes, while Alex lay cursing me in his sleep. Then I realized I had three hours to kill, and absolutely nothing



left to do, so I crawled back into bed. When I woke for the second time, Alex and Laura were both up, and eating breakfast.

When I sat down opposite Laura, though, I wondered if I was dreaming: one of those insidiously reassuring no-need-to-wake-because-you-already-have dreams. My 14-year-old daughter's face and arms were covered in alchemical and zodiacal symbols in iridescent reds, greens and blues. She looked like a character in some dire VR-as-psychedelia movie who'd been mauled by the special effects software.

She stared back at me defiantly, as if I'd somehow expressed disapproval. In fact, I hadn't yet worked my way around to such a mundane emotion – and by the time I did, I kept my mouth firmly shut. Knowing Laura, these were definitely not fakes which would wash off – but transdermal enzyme patches could still erase them as bloodlessly as the dye-bearing ones which had implanted them. So I was good, I didn't say a word: no cheap reverse-psychology (“Oh, aren't they *sweet*?”), no (honest) complaints about the harassment I'd get from her principal if they weren't gone by the start of term.

Laura said, “Did you know that Isaac Newton spent more time on alchemy than he did on the theory of gravity?”

“Yes. Did you know he also died a virgin? Role models are great, aren't they?”

Alex gave me a sideways warning look, but didn't buy in. Laura continued, “There's a whole secret history of science that's been censored from the official accounts. Hidden knowledge that's only coming to light now that everyone has access to the original sources.”

It was hard to know how to respond honestly to this without groaning aloud. I said evenly, “I think you'll find that most of it has actually ‘come to light’ before. It's just turned out to be of limited interest. But sure, it's fascinating to see some of the blind alleys people have explored.”

Laura smiled at me pityingly. “*Blind alleys!*” She finished picking the toast crumbs off her plate, then she rose and left the room with a spring in her step, as if she'd won some kind of battle.

I said plaintively, “What did I miss? When did all this start?”

Alex was unfazed. “I think it's mostly just the music. Or rather, three 17-year-old boys with supernaturally perfect skin and big brown contact lenses, called The Alchemists –”

“Yes, I *know* the band – but New Hermetics is more than the bubblegum music, it's a major cult –”

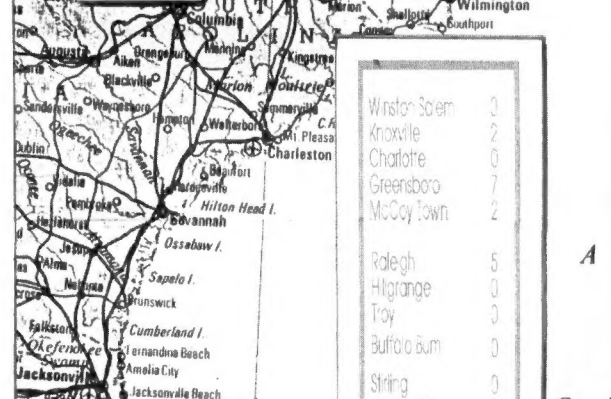
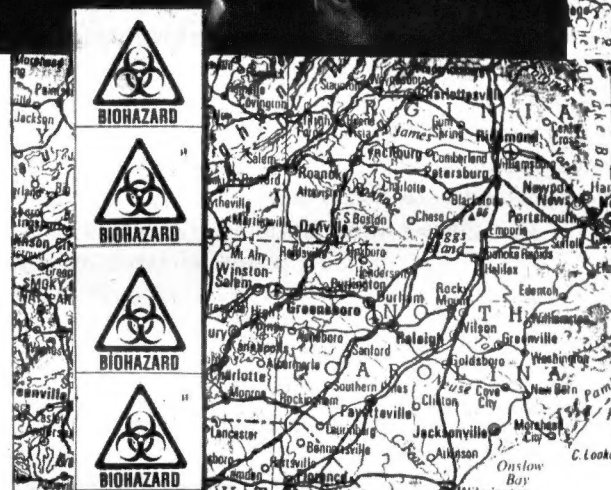
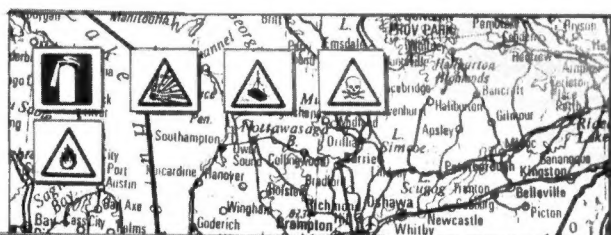
He laughed. “Oh, come on! Wasn't your sister deeply in lust with the lead singer of some quasi-Satanic heavy metal group? I don't recall her ending up nailing black cats to upside-down crucifixes.”

“That was never *lust*. She just wanted to discover his hair-care secrets.”

Alex said firmly, “Laura is fine. Just... relax and sit it out. Unless you want to buy her a copy of *Foucault's Pendulum*?”

“She'd probably miss the irony.”

He prodded me on the arm; mock-violence, but gen-



Winston Salem	0
Knoxville	2
Charlotte	0
Greensboro	7
McKay Town	2
Raleigh	5
Hilgrange	0
Troy	0
Buffalo Bum	0
String	0
Janitor PG	5
Saratoville	0
Issacs Mount	10
Br	1
Herodotus	0
Apraville	1
Fony	1
Granville	3
Silver Bullet	0
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Babylon Hars	5

uine anger. “*That’s* unfair. She’ll chew up New Hermetics and spit it out in... six months, at the most. How long did Scientology last? A week?”

I said, “*Scientology* is crass, transparent gibberish. New Hermetics has five thousand years of cultural adornment to draw on. It’s every bit as insidious as Buddhism or Catholicism: there’s a tradition, there’s a whole aesthetic –”

Alex cut in, “Yes – and in six months’ time, she’ll understand: the aesthetic can be appreciated without swallowing any of the bullshit. Just because alchemy was a blind alley, that doesn’t mean it isn’t still elegant and fascinating... but *being* elegant and fascinating doesn’t render a word of it true.”

I reflected on that for a while, then I leant over and kissed him. “I hate it when you’re right: you always make it sound so obvious. I’m too damn protective, aren’t I? She’ll work it all out for herself.”

“You know she will.”

I glanced at my watch. “*Shit*. Can you drive me to La Guardia? I’m never going to get a cab, now.”

Early in the pandemic, I’d pulled a few strings and arranged for a group of my students to observe a Silver Fire patient close up. It had seemed wrong to bury ourselves in the abstractions of maps and graphs, numerical models and extrapolations – however vital they were to the battle – without witnessing the real physical condition of an individual human being.

We didn’t have to don biohazard suits; the young man lay in a glass-walled, hermetically sealed room. Tubes brought him oxygen, water, electrolytes and nutrients – along with antibiotics, antipyretics, immunosuppressants, and pain killers. No bed, no mattress; the patient was embedded in a transparent polymer gel: a kind of buoyant semi-solid which limited pressure sores and drew away the blood and lymphatic fluid weeping out through what used to be his skin.

I surprised myself by crying, silently and briefly, hot tears of anger. Rage dissipating into a vacuum; I knew there was no one to blame. Half the students had medical degrees – but if anything, they seemed more shaken than the green statisticians who’d never set foot in a trauma ward or an operating theatre – probably because they could better imagine what the man would have been feeling without a skull full of opiates.

The official label for the condition was Systemic Fibrotic Viral Scleroderma – but SFVS was unpronounceable, and apparently people’s eyes glazed over if news readers spelt out four whole letters. I used the new name like everyone else – but I never stopped loathing it. It was too fucking poetic by far.

When the Silver Fire virus infected fibroblasts in the subcutaneous connective tissue, it caused them to go into overdrive, manufacturing vast quantities of collagen – in a variant form transcribed from the normal gene but imperfectly assembled. This denatured protein formed solid plaques in the extracellular space, disrupting the nutrient flow to the dermis above – and eventually becoming so bulky as to shear it off completely. Silver Fire flayed you from within. A good strategy for releasing large amounts of virus, maybe – though when it had stumbled on the trick, no one knew. The presumed animal host in which the par-

ent strain lived, benignly or otherwise, was yet to be found.

If the lymph-glistening sickly white of naked collagen plaques was “silver”, the fever, the auto-immune response, and the sensation of being burned alive was “fire.” Mercifully, the pain couldn’t last long, either way. The standard First World palliative treatment included constant deep anaesthesia – and if you didn’t get that level of high-tech intervention, you went into shock, fast, and died.

Two years after the first outbreaks, the origin of the virus remained unknown, a vaccine was still a remote prospect – and though patients could be kept alive almost indefinitely, all attempts to effect a cure by purging the body of the virus and grafting cultured skin had failed.

Four hundred thousand people had been infected, worldwide; nine out of ten were dead. Ironically, rapid onset due to malnutrition had all but eliminated Silver Fire in the poorest nations; most outbreaks in Africa had burned themselves out on the spot. The US not only had more hospitalized victims on life support, per capita, than any other nation; it was heading for the top of the list in the rate of new cases.

A handshake or even a ride in a packed bus could transmit the virus – with a low probability for each contact event, but it added up. The only thing that helped in the medium term was isolating potential carriers – and to date it had seemed that no one could remain infectious and healthy for long. If the “trail” Brecht’s computers had found was more than a statistical mirage, cutting it short might save dozens of lives – and understanding it might save thousands.

It was almost noon when the plane touched down at the Triad airport on the outskirts of Greensboro. There was a hire car waiting for me; I waved my notepad at the dashboard to transmit my profile, then waited as the seating and controls rearranged themselves slightly, piezoelectric actuators humming. As I started to reverse out of the parking bay, the stereo began a soothing improvisation, flashing up a deadpan title: *Music for Leaving Airports on June 11, 2008*.

I got a shock driving into town: there were dozens of large plots of tobacco visible from the road. The born-again weed was encroaching everywhere, and not even the suburbs were safe. The irony had become clichéd, but it was still something to witness the reality firsthand: even as nicotine was finally going the way of absinthe, more tobacco was being cultivated than ever before – because tobacco mosaic virus had turned out to be an extremely convenient and efficient vector for introducing new genes. The leaves of these plants would be loaded with pharmaceuticals or vaccine antigens – and worth 20 times as much as their unmodified ancestors at the height of demand.

My first appointment was still almost an hour away, so I drove around town in search of lunch. I’d been so wound up since Brecht’s call, I was surprised at just how good I felt to have arrived. Maybe it was no more than travelling south, with the sudden slight shift in the angle of the light – a kind of beneficent latitudinal equivalent of jet lag. Certainly, everything in downtown Greensboro appeared positively luminous after NYC, with modern buildings in pastel shades looking curiously harmonious

beside the gleamingly preserved historic ones.

I ended up eating sandwiches in a small diner – and going through my notes again, obsessively. It was seven years since I'd done anything like this for real, and I'd had little time to make the mental transition from theoretician back to practitioner.

There'd been four new cases of Silver Fire in Greensboro in the preceding fortnight. Health authorities everywhere had long ago given up trying to establish the path of infection for every last case; given the ease of transmission, and the inability to question the patients themselves, it was a massively labour-intensive process which yielded few tangible benefits. The most useful strategy wasn't backtracking, but rather quarantining the family, workmates and other known contacts of each new case, for about a week. Carriers were infectious for two or three days at the most before becoming – very obviously – sick themselves; you didn't need to go looking for them. Brecht's rainbow trail either meant an exception to this rule... or a ripple of new cases propagating from town to town without any single carrier.

Greensboro's population was about a quarter of a million – though it depended on exactly where you drew the boundaries. North Carolina had never gone in much for implosive urbanization; growth in rural areas had actually outstripped growth in the major cities in recent years, and the microvillage movement had taken off here in a big way – at least as much as on the west coast.

I displayed a contoured population density map of the region on my notepad; even Raleigh, Charlotte and Greensboro were only modest elevations against the gently undulating background of the countryside – and only the Appalachians themselves cut a deep trench through this inverted topography. Hundreds of small new communities dotted the map, between the already numerous established towns. The microvillages weren't literally self-sustaining, but they were definitely high-tech Green, with photovoltaics, small-scale local water treatment, and satellite links in lieu of connections to any centralized utilities. Most of their income came from cottage service industries: software, design, music, animation.

I switched on an overlay showing the estimated magnitude of population flows, on the timescale relevant to Silver Fire. The major roads and highways glowed white hot, and the small towns were linked into the skein by their own slender capillaries... but the microvillages all but vanished from the scene: everyone worked from home. So it wasn't all that unlikely for a random Silver Fire outbreak to have spread straight down the interstate, rather than diffusing in a classic drunkard's walk across this relatively populous landscape.

Still... the whole point of being here was to find out the one thing that none of the computer models could tell me: whether or not the assumptions they were based on were dangerously flawed.

I left the diner and set to work. The four cases came from four separate families; I was in for a long day.

All the people I interviewed were out of quarantine,

but still suffering various degrees of shock. Silver Fire hit like an express train: there was no time to grasp what was happening before a perfectly healthy child or parent, spouse or lover, all but died in front of your eyes. The last thing you needed was a two-hour interrogation by a total stranger.

It was dusk by the time I reached the last family – and any joy I'd felt at being back in the field had long since worn off. I sat in the car for a minute, staring at the immaculate garden and lace curtains, listening to the crickets, wishing I didn't have to go in and face these people.

Diane Clayton taught high school mathematics; her husband, Ed, was an engineer, working night shifts for the local power company. They had a 13-year-old daughter, Cheryl. Mike, 18, was in the hospital.

I sat with the three of them, but it was Ms Clayton who did most of the talking. She was scrupulously patient and courteous with me – but after a while, it became clear that she was still in a kind of daze. She answered every question slowly and thoughtfully – but I had no idea if she really knew what she was saying, or whether she was just going through the motions on autopilot.

Mike's father wasn't much help, since the shiftwork had kept him out of synch with the rest of the family. I tried increasing eye contact with Cheryl, encouraging her to speak. It was absurd, but I felt guilty even as I did it – as if I'd come here to sell the family some junk product, and now I was trying to bypass parental resistance.

"So... Tuesday night he definitely stayed home?" I was filling in a chart of Mike Clayton's movements for the week before symptoms appeared – hour-by-hour. It was a fastidious, nit-picking Gestapo routine that made the old days of merely asking for a list of sexual partners and fluids exchanged seem positively idyllic.

"Yes, that's right." Diane Clayton screwed her eyes shut and ran through her memories of the night again. "I watched some television with Cheryl, then went to bed around... eleven. Mike must have been in his room all the time." He'd been on vacation from UNC Greensboro, with no reason to spend his evenings studying – but he might have been socializing electronically, or watching a movie.

Cheryl glanced at me uncertainly, then said shyly, "I think he went out."

Her mother turned to her, frowning. "Tuesday night? No!"

I asked Cheryl, "Do you have any idea where?"

"Some nightclub, I think."

"He said that?"

She shrugged. "He was dressed for it."

"But he didn't say where?"

"No."

"Could it have been somewhere else? A friend's place? A party?" My information was that no nightclubs in Greensboro were open on Tuesdays.

Cheryl thought it over. "He said he was going dancing. That's all he said."

I turned back to Diane Clayton; she was clearly upset at being cut out of the discussion. "Do you know who he might have gone with?"

If Mike was in a steady relationship he hadn't mentioned the fact, but she gave me the names of three old

school friends. She kept apologizing to me for her "negligence."

I said, "It's all right. Really. No one can remember every last detail."

She was still distraught when I left, an hour later. Her son leaving the house without telling her – or the fact that he'd told her, and it had slipped her mind – was now (somehow) the reason for the whole tragedy.

I felt partly to blame for her distress, myself – though I didn't see how I could have handled things any differently. The hospital would have offered her expert counselling – that wasn't my job at all. And there was sure to be more of the same ahead; if I started taking it personally, I'd be a wreck in a matter of days.

I managed to track down all three friends before eleven – about the latest I dared call anyone – but none of them had been with Mike on Tuesday night, or had any idea where he'd been. They helped me cross-check some other details, though. I ended up sitting in the car making calls for almost two hours.

Maybe there'd been a party, maybe there hadn't. Maybe it had been a pretext for something else; the possibilities were endless. Blank spots on the charts were a matter of course; I could have spent a month in Greensboro trying to fill them all in, without success. If the hypothetical carrier *had* been at this hypothetical party (and the other three members of the Greensboro Four definitely hadn't – they were all accounted for on the night) I'd just have to pick up the trail further on.

I checked into a motel and lay awake for a while, listening to the traffic on the interstate. Thinking of Alex and Laura – and trying to imagine the unimaginable.

But it couldn't happen to them. They were mine. I'd protect them.

How? By moving to Antarctica?

Silver Fire was rarer than cancer, rarer than heart disease, rarer than death by automobile. Rarer than gunshot wounds, in some cities. But there was no strategy for avoiding it – short of complete physical isolation.

And Diane Clayton was now torturing herself for failing to keep her 18-year-old son locked up for the summer vacation. Asking herself, over and over: *What did I do wrong? Why did this happen? What am I being punished for?*

I should have taken her aside, looked her squarely in the eye, and reminded her: "This is not your fault! There's nothing you could have done to prevent it!"

I should have said: *It just happened. People suffer like this for no reason. There is no sense to be made of your son's ruined life. There is no meaning to be found here. Just a random dance of molecules.*

I woke early and skipped breakfast; I was on the I-40, heading west, by 7.30. I drove straight past Winston-Salem; a couple of people had been infected there recently – but not recently enough to be part of the trail.

Sleep had taken the edge off my pessimism. The morning was cool and clear, and the countryside was stunning – or at least, it was where it hadn't been turned over to monotonous biotech crops, or worse: golf courses.

Still, some things had definitely changed for the bet-

ter. It was on the I-40 – more than 20 years before – that I'd first heard a radio evangelist preaching the 80s' gospel of hate: AIDS as God's instrument, HIV as the righteous virus sent down from Heaven to smite adulterers, junkies and faggots. (I'd been young and hot-headed, then; I'd pulled off at the next exit, phoned the radio station, and heaped abuse on some poor receptionist.) But proponents of this subtle theology had fallen curiously silent ever since an immortalized cell line derived from the bone marrow of a Kenyan prostitute had proved more than a match for the omnipotent deity's secret weapon. And if Christian fundamentalism wasn't exactly dead and buried, its power base had certainly gone into decline; the kind of ignorance and insularity it relied upon seemed to be becoming almost impossible to sustain against the tide of information.

Local audio had long since shifted to the net, of course, evangelists and all; the old frequencies had fallen silent. And I was out of range of cellular contact with the beast with 20,000 channels... but the car did have a satellite link. I switched on my notepad, hoping for some light relief.

I'd programmed Ariadne, my knowledge miner, to scan all available media outlets for references to Silver Fire. Maybe it was sheer masochism, but there was something perversely fascinating about the distorted shadow the real pandemic cast in the shallows of media space: rumours and misinformation, hysteria, exploitation.

The tabloid angles, as always, were predictably inane: Silver Fire was a disease from space/the inevitable result of fluoridation/the reason half a dozen celebrities had disappeared from the public gaze. Three false modes of transmission were on offer: today it was tampons, Mexican orange juice, and mosquitos (again). Several young victims with attractive "before" shots and family members willing to break down on camera had been duly rounded up. New century, same old foxshit.

The most bizarre item in Ariadne's latest sweep wasn't classic tabloid at all, though. It was an interview on a program called *The Terminal Chat Show* (23:00 GMT, Thursdays, on Britain's Channel 4) with a Canadian academic, James Springer, who was touring the UK (in the flesh) to promote his new hypertext, *The Cyber Sutras*.

Springer was a balding, middle-aged, avuncular man. He was introduced as Associate Professor of Theory at McGill University; apparently only the hopelessly reductionist asked: "Theory of *what*?" His area of expertise was described as "computers and spirituality" – but for reasons I couldn't quite fathom, his opinion was sought on Silver Fire.

"The crucial thing," he insisted smoothly, "is that Silver Fire is the very first plague of the Information Age. AIDS was certainly post-industrial and post-modernist, but its onset predated the emergence of true Information Age cultural sensibilities. AIDS, for me, embodied the whole negative zeitgeist of Western materialism confronting its inevitable *fin de siècle* crisis of confidence – but with Silver Fire, I think we're free to embrace far more positive metaphors for this

so-called 'disease'."

The interviewer enquired warily, "So... you're hopeful that Silver Fire victims will be spared the stigmatization and hysteria which accompanied AIDS?"

Springer nodded cheerfully. "Of course! We've made enormous strides forward in cultural analysis since those days! I mean, if Burroughs' *Cities of the Red Night* had only penetrated the collective subconscious more fully when it appeared, the whole course of the AIDS plague might have been radically different – and that's a hot topic in Uchronic Studies which one of my doctoral students is currently pursuing. But there's no doubt that Information Age cultural forms have fully prepared us for Silver Fire. When I look at global techno-anarchist raves, trading-card tattoo body comics, and affordable desktop implementations of the Dalai Lama... it's clear to me that Silver Fire is a sequence of RNA whose time has come. If it didn't exist, we'd have to synthesize it!"

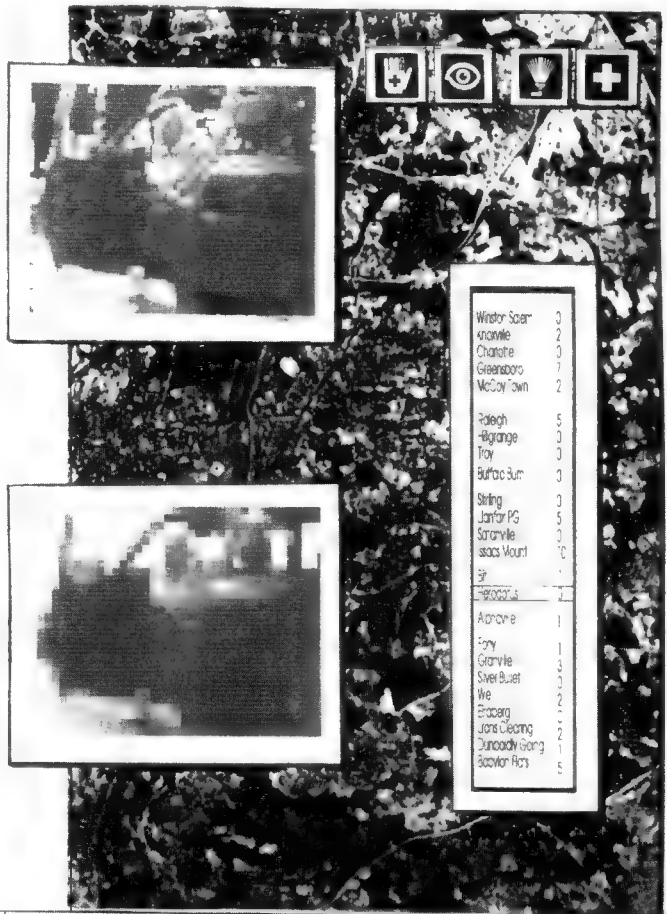
My next stop was a town called Statesville. A brother and sister in their late teens, Ben and Lisa Walker, and the sister's boyfriend, Paul Scott, were in hospital in Winston-Salem. The families had only just returned home.

Lisa and Ben had been living with their widower father and a nine-year-old brother. Lisa had worked in a local store, alongside the owner – who'd remained symptom-free. Ben had worked in a vaccine-extraction plant, and Paul Scott had been unemployed, living with his mother. Lisa seemed the most likely of the three to have become infected first; in theory, all it took was an accidental brush of skin against skin as a credit card changed hands – albeit with only a 1-in-100 chance of transmission. In the larger cities, some people who dealt with the public in the flesh had taken to wearing gloves – and some (arguably paranoid) subway commuters covered every square centimetre of skin below the neck, even in midsummer – but the absolute risk was so small that few strategies like this had become widespread.

I grilled Mr Walker as gently as I could. His children's movements for most of the week were like clockwork; the only time during the window of infection when they'd been anywhere but work or home was Thursday night. Both had been out until the early hours, Lisa visiting Paul, Ben visiting his girlfriend, Martha Amos. Whether the couples had gone anywhere, or stayed in, he wasn't certain – but there wasn't much happening locally on a weeknight, and they hadn't mentioned driving out of town.

I phoned Martha Amos; she told me that she and Ben had been at her house, alone, until about two. Since she hadn't been infected, presumably Ben had picked up the virus from his sister sometime later – and Lisa had either been infected by Paul that night, or vice versa.

According to Paul's mother, he'd barely left the house all week, which made him an unlikely entry point. Statesville seemed to be making perfect sense: customer to Lisa in the store (Thursday afternoon), Lisa to Paul (Thursday night), Lisa to Ben (Friday morning). Next stop, I'd ask the store owner what she remembered



about their out-of-town customers that day.

But then Ms Scott said, "Thursday night, Paul was over at the Walkers until late. That's the only time he went out, that I can think of."

"He went to see Lisa? She didn't come here?"

"No. He left for the Walkers, about half past eight."

"And they were just going to hang around the house? They had nothing special planned?"

"Paul doesn't have a lot of money, you know. They can't afford to go out much – it's not easy for them." She spoke in a relaxed, confiding tone – as if the relationship, with all its minor tribulations, had merely been put on hold. I hoped someone would be around to support her when the truth struck home in a couple of days.

I called at Martha Amos's house. I hadn't paid close enough attention to her when I'd phoned; I could see now that she was not in good shape.

I asked her, "Did Ben happen to tell you where his sister went with Paul Scott on Thursday night?"

She stared at me expressionlessly.

"I'm sorry, I know this is intrusive – but no one else seems to know. If you can remember anything he said, it could be very helpful."

Martha said, "He told me to say he was with me. I always covered for him. His father wouldn't have... approved."

"Hang on. Ben wasn't with you on Thursday night?"

"I went with him a couple of times. But it's not my kind of thing. The people are all right. The music's shit, though."

"Where? Are you talking about some bar?"

"No! *The villages*. Ben and Paul and Lisa went out to the villages, Thursday night." She suddenly focused on me properly, for the first time since I'd arrived; I think she'd finally realized that she hadn't been making a lot of sense. "They hold 'Events'. Which are just dance parties, really. It's no big deal. Only – Ben's father would assume it's all about *drugs*. Which it's not." She put her face in her hands. "But that's where they caught Silver Fire, isn't it?"

"I don't know."

She was shaking; I reached across and touched her arm. She looked up at me and said wearily, "You know what hurts the most?"

"What?"

"I didn't go with them. I keep thinking: *If I'd gone, it would have been all right*. They wouldn't have caught it then. I would have kept them safe."

She searched my face – as if for some hint as to what she might have done. *I was hunting down Silver Fire, wasn't I?* I ought to have been able to tell her, precisely, how she could have warded off the curse: what magic she hadn't performed, what sacrifice she hadn't made.

And I'd seen this a thousand times before – but I still didn't know what to say. All it took was the shock of grief to peel away the veneer of understanding: *Life is not a morality play. Disease is just disease; it carries no hidden meaning. There are no gods we failed to appease, no elemental spirits we failed to bargain with*. Every sane adult knew this – but the knowledge was still only skin deep. At some level, we still hadn't swallowed the hardest-won truth of all: *The universe is*

indifferent.

Martha hugged herself, rocking gently. "I know it's crazy, thinking like that. But it still hurts."

I spent the rest of the day trying to find someone who could tell me more about Thursday night's "Event" (such as where, exactly, it had taken place – there were at least four possibilities within a 20-kilometre radius). I had no luck, though; it seemed microvillage culture was very much a minority taste, and Statesville's only three enthusiasts were now *incommunicado*. Drugs weren't the issue with most of the people I talked to; they just seemed to think the villagers were boring tech-heads with appalling taste in music.

Another night, another motel. It was beginning to feel like old times.

Mike Clayton had gone dancing, somewhere, on the Tuesday night. *Out in the villages?* Presumably he hadn't travelled quite this far, but an unknown person – a tourist, maybe – might easily have been at both Events: Tuesday night near Greensboro, Thursday night near Statesville. If this was true, it would narrow down the possibilities considerably – at least compared to the number of people who'd simply passed through the towns themselves.

I pored over road maps for a while, trying to decide which village would be easiest to add to the next day's itinerary. I'd searched the directories for some kind of "microvillage nightlife" web site – in vain, but that didn't mean anything. The address had no doubt made its way, by electronic diffusion, to everyone who was genuinely interested – and whichever village I went to, half a dozen people were sure to know all about the Events.

I climbed into bed around midnight – but then reached for my notepad again, to check with Ariadne. Silver Fire had made the big time: video fiction. There was a reference in the latest episode of NBC's "hit sci-fi drama," *Mutilated Mystic Empaths in N-Space*.

I'd heard of the series, but never watched it before, so I quickly scanned the pilot. "Don't you know the first law of astronavigation! Ask a *computer* to solve equations in *17-dimensional hypergeometry*... and its rigid, deterministic, linear mind would shatter like a diamond dropped into a black hole! Only *twin telepathic Buddhist nuns*, with seventh-dan black belts in karate, and enough self-discipline to *hack their own legs from their bodies*, could ever hope to master the *intuitive skills* required to navigate the treacherous quantum fluctuations of N-space and rescue that stranded fleet!"

"My God, Captain, you're right – but where will we find...?"

MME was set in the 22nd century – but the Silver Fire reference was no clumsy anachronism. Our heroines miscalculate a difficult trans-galactic jump (breathing the wrong way during the recitation of a crucial mantra), and end up in Present Day San Francisco. There, a small boy and his dog, on the run from mafia hitmen, help them repair a vital component in their Tantric Energy Source. After humiliating the assassins with a perfectly choreographed display of legless martial arts amid the scaffolding of a high-rise construction site, they track down the boy's mother to

a hospital, where she turns out to be infected with Silver Fire.

The camera angles here grow coy. The few glimpses of actual flesh are sanitized fantasies: glowing ivory, smooth and dry.

The boy (whose recently slaughtered accountant-for-the-mob father concealed the truth from him), bursts into tears when he sees her. But the MMEs are philosophical:

"These well-meaning doctors and nurses will tell you that your Mom has suffered a terrible fate – but in time, the truth will be understood by all. Silver Fire is the closest we can come, in this world, to the Ecstasy of Unbeing. You observe only the frozen shell of her body... but inside, in the realm of *shunyata*, a great and wonderful transformation is at work."

"Really?"

"Really."

Boy dries tears, theme music soars, dog jumps up and licks everyone's faces. Cathartic laughter all round.

(Except, of course, from the mother.)

The next day, I had appointments in two small towns further along the highway. The first patient was a divorced 45-year-old man, a technician at a textile factory. Neither his brother nor his colleagues could offer me much help; for all they knew, he could have driven to a different town (or village) every single night during the period in question.

In the next town, a couple in their mid-30s and their eight-year-old daughter had died. The symptoms must have hit all three more-or-less simultaneously – and escalated more rapidly than usual – because no one had managed to call for help.

The woman's sister told me without hesitation, "Friday night, they would have gone out to the villages. That's what they usually did."

"And they would have taken their daughter?"

She opened her mouth to reply – but then froze and just stared at me, mortified – as if I was blaming her sister for recklessly exposing the child to some unspeakable danger. There were photographs of all three on the mantelpiece behind her. This woman had discovered their disintegrating bodies.

I said gently, "No place is safer than any other. It only looks that way in hindsight. They could have caught Silver Fire anywhere at all – and I'm just trying to trace the path of the infection, after the event."

She nodded slowly. "They always took Phoebe. She loved the villages; she had friends in most of them."

"Do you know which village they went to, that night?"

"I think it was Herodotus."

Out in the car, I found it on the map. It

wasn't much further from the highway than the one I'd chosen purely for convenience; I could probably drive out there and still make it to the next motel by a civilized hour.

I clicked on the tiny dot; the information window told me: *Herodotus, Catawba County. Population 106, established 2004.*

I said, "More."

The map said, "That's all."

Solar panels, twin satellite dishes, vegetable gardens, water tanks, boxy pre-fabricated buildings... there was no single component of the village which couldn't have been found on almost any large rural property. It was only seeing all of them thrown together in the middle of the countryside that was startling. Herodotus resembled nothing so much as a 20th century artist's impression of a pioneering settlement on some Earth-like – but definitely alien – planet.

A major exception was the car park, discreetly hidden behind the huge banks of photovoltaic cells. With only a bus and two other cars, there was room for maybe a hundred more vehicles. Visitors were clearly welcome in Herodotus; there wasn't even a meter to feed.

Despite the prefabs, there was no army-camp feel to the layout; the buildings obeyed some symmetry I couldn't quite parse, clustered around a central square – but they certainly weren't lined up in rows like quonset huts. As I entered the square, I could see a basketball game in progress in a court off to one side; teenagers playing, and younger children watching. It was the only obvious sign of life. I approached – feeling a bit like a trespasser, even if this was as much a public space as the main street of any ordinary town.

I stood by the other spectators and watched the game for a while. None of the children spoke to me, but it didn't feel like I was being actively snubbed. The teams were mixed-sex, and play was intense but good-



natured. The kids were Anglo-, African-, Chinese-American. I'd heard rumours that certain villages were "effectively segregated" – whatever that meant – but it might well have been nothing but propaganda.

The microvillage movement had stirred some controversy when it started, but the lifestyle wasn't exactly radical. A hundred or so people – who would have worked from their homes in towns or cities anyway – pooled their resources and bought some cheap land out in the country, making up for the lack of amenities with a few state-of-the-art technological fixes. Residents were just as likely to be stockbrokers as artists or musicians – and though any characterization was bound to be unfair, most villages were definitely closer to yuppie sanctuaries than anarchist communes.

I couldn't have faced the physical isolation, myself – and no amount of bandwidth would have compensated – but if the people here were happy, all power to them. I was ready to concede that in 50 years' time, living in Queens would be looked on as infinitely more perverse and inexplicable than living in a place like Herodotus.

A young girl, six or seven years old, tapped my arm. I smiled down at her. "Hello."

She said, "Are you on the trail of happiness?"

Before I could ask her what she meant, someone called out, "Hello there!"

I turned; it was a woman – in her mid-20s, I guessed – shielding her eyes from the sun. She approached, smiling, and offered me her hand.

"I'm Sally Grant."

"Claire Booth."

"You're a bit early for the Event. It doesn't start until 9.30."

"I –"

"So if you want a meal at my place, you'd be welcome."

I hesitated. "That's very kind of you."

"Ten dollars sound fair? That's what I'd charge if I opened the cafeteria – only there were no bookings tonight, so I won't be."

I nodded.

"Well, drop in around seven. I'm number 23."

"Thank you. Thank you very much."

I sat on a bench in the village square, shaded from the sunset by the hall in front of me, listening to the cries from the basketball court. I knew I should have told Ms Grant straight away what I was doing here; shown her my ID, asked the questions I was permitted to ask, and left. *But mightn't I learn more by staying to watch the Event? Informally?* Even a few crude first-hand observations of the demographics of this unmodelled contact between the villagers and the other local populations might be useful – and though the carrier was obviously long gone, this was still a chance to get a very rough profile of the kind of person I was looking for.

Uneasily, I came to a decision. There was no reason not to stay for the party – and no need to make the villagers anxious and defensive by telling them why I was here.

From the inside, the Grants' house looked more like a spacious, modern apartment than a factory-built box which had been delivered on the back of a truck to the

middle of nowhere. I'd been unconsciously expecting the clutter of a mobile home, with too many mod cons per cubic metre to leave room to breathe, but I'd misjudged the scale completely.

Sally's husband, Oliver, was an architect. She edited travel guides by day; the cafeteria was a sideline. They were founding residents, originally from Raleigh; there were still only a handful of later arrivals. Herodotus, they explained, was self-sufficient in (vegetarian) staple foods, but there were regular deliveries of all the imports any small town relied on. They both made occasional trips to Greensboro, or interstate, but their routine work was pure telecommuting.

"And when you're not on holidays, Claire?"

"I'm an administrator at Columbia."

"That must be fascinating." It certainly turned out to be a good choice; my hosts changed the subject back to themselves immediately.

I asked Sally, "So what clinched the move for you? Raleigh's not exactly the crime capital of the nation." I found it hard to believe that the real estate prices could have driven them out, either.

She replied without hesitation, "Spiritual criteria, Claire."

I blinked.

Oliver laughed pleasantly. "It's all right, you haven't come to the wrong place!" He turned to his wife. "Did you see her face? You'd think she'd stumbled onto some enclave of *Mormons* or *Baptists*!"

Sally explained, apologetically, "I meant the word in its broadest sense, of course: an understanding that we need to *re-sensitize ourselves* to the *moral dimensions* of the world around us."

That left me none the wiser, but she was clearly expecting a sympathetic response. I said tentatively, "And you think... living in a small community like this makes your civic responsibilities clearer, more readily apparent?"

Now Sally was bemused. "Well... yes, I suppose it does. But that's just politics, really, isn't it? Not *spirituality*. I meant –" She raised her hands, and beamed at me. "I just *meant*, the reason you're here, yourself! We came to Herodotus to find – for a lifetime – what you've come here to find for a few hours, yourself!"

I heard the other cars begin to arrive while I sat drinking coffee with Sally in the living room. Oliver had excused himself for an urgent meeting with a construction manager in Tokyo. I passed the time with small-talk about Alex and Laura, and my Worst Ever New York Experience horror stories – some of which were true. It wasn't a lack of curiosity that kept me from probing Sally about the Event – I was just afraid of alerting her to the fact that I had no idea what I'd let myself in for. When she left me for a minute, I scanned the room – without rising from my chair – for any sign of what she might have *come here to find for a lifetime*. All I had time to take in were a few CD covers, the half-dozen visible ones on a large rotating rack. Most looked like modern music/video, from bands I'd never heard of. There was one familiar title, though: James Springer's *The Cyber Sutras*.

By the time the three of us crossed the square and

approached the village hall – a barn-like structure, resembling a very large cargo container – I was quite tense. There were 30 or 40 people in the square, most but not all in their late teens or early 20s, dressed in the kind of diverse mock-casual clothing that might have been seen outside any nightclub in the country. *So what was I afraid was going to happen?* Just because Ben Walker couldn't tell his father about it, and Mike Clayton couldn't tell his mother, didn't mean I'd wandered into some southern remake of *Twin Peaks*. Maybe bored kids just snuck out to the villages to pop hallucinogens at dance parties – my own youth resurrected before my eyes, with safer drugs and better light shows.

As we approached the hall, a small group of people filed in through the self-opening doors, giving me a brief glimpse of bodies silhouetted against swirling lights, and a blast of music. My anxiety began to seem absurd. Sally and Oliver were into psychedelics, that was all – and Herodotus's founders had apparently decided to create a congenial environment in which to use them. I paid the 60-dollar entry fee, smiling with relief.

Inside, the walls and ceiling were ablaze with convoluted patterns: soft-edged multi-hued fractals pulsing with the music, like vast colour-coded simulations of turbulent fluids cascading down giant fret-boards at Mach 5. The dancers cast no shadows; these were high-power wall-screens, not projections. Stunning resolution – and astronomically expensive.

Sally pressed a fluorescent-pink capsule into my hand. Harmony or Halcyon, maybe; I no longer knew what was fashionable. I tried to thank her, and offer some excuse about "saving it for later" – but she didn't hear a word, so we just smiled at each other meaninglessly. The hall's sound insulation was extraordinary (which was lucky for the other villagers); I would never have guessed from outside that my brain was going to be pureed.

Sally and Oliver vanished into the crowd. I decided to hang around for half an hour or so, then slip out and drive on to the motel. I stood and watched the people dancing, trying to keep my head clear despite the stupefying backdrops... though I doubted that I could learn much about the carrier that I didn't already know. *Probably under 25. Probably not towing small children.* Sally had given me all the details I needed to obtain information on Events from here to Memphis – past and future. The search was still going to be difficult, but at least I was making progress.

A sudden loud cheer from the crowd broke through the music – *and the room was transformed before my eyes*. For a moment I was utterly disorientated – and even when the world began to make visual sense again, it took me a while to get the details straight.

The wall-screens now showed dancers in identical rooms to the one I was standing in; only the ceiling continued to play the abstract animation. These identical rooms all had wall-screens themselves, which also showed identical rooms full of dancers... much like the infinite regress between a pair of mirrors.

And at first, I thought the "other rooms" were merely realtime images of the Herodotus dance hall



itself. But... the swirling vortex pattern on the ceiling joined seamlessly with the animation on the ceilings of "adjacent" rooms, combining to form a single complex image; there was no repetition, reflected or otherwise. And the crowds of dancers were *not* identical – though they all looked sufficiently alike to make it hard to be sure, from a distance. Belatedly, I turned around and examined the closest wall, just four or five metres away. A young man "behind" the screen raised a hand in greeting, and I returned the gesture automatically. We couldn't quite make convincing eye contact – and wherever the cameras were placed, that would have

been a lot to ask for – but it was, still, almost possible to believe that nothing really separated us but a thin wall of glass.

The man smiled dreamily and walked away.

I had goosebumps. This was nothing new in principle, but the technology here had been pushed to its limits. The sense of being in an infinite dance hall was utterly compelling; I could see no “furthest hall” in any direction (and when they ran out of real ones, they could have easily recycled them). The flatness of the images, the incorrect scaling as you moved, the lack of parallax (worst of all when I tried to peer into the “corner rooms” between the main four... which “should” have been possible, but wasn’t) served more to make the space beyond the walls appear exotically distorted than to puncture the effect. The brain actually struggled to compensate, to cover up the flaws – and if I’d swallowed Sally’s capsule, I doubt I would have been nit-picking. As it was, I was grinning like a child on a fairground ride.

I saw people dancing facing the walls, loosely forming couples or groups across the link. I was mesmerized; I forgot all thoughts of leaving. After a while, I bumped into Oliver, who was swaying happily by himself. I screamed into his ear, “These are all other villages?” He nodded, and shouted back, “East is east and west is west!” Meaning... the virtual layout followed real geography – it just abolished the intervening distances? I recalled something James Springer had said in his *Terminal Chat Show* interview: *We must invent a new cartography, to re-chart the planet in its newborn, Protean state. There is no separation, now. There are no borders.*

Yeah... and the world was just one giant party. Still, at least they weren’t splicing in live connections to war zones. I’d seen enough we-dance/you-dodge-shells “solidarity” in the 90s to last a lifetime.

It suddenly occurred to me: *If the carrier really was travelling from Event to Event... then he or she was “here” with me, right now. My quarry had to be one of the dancers in this giant, imaginary hall.*

And this fact implied no opportunity – let alone any kind of danger. It wasn’t as if Silver Fire carriers conveniently fluoresced in the dark. But it still felt like the strangest moment of a long, strange night: to understand that the two of us were finally “connected”, to understand that I’d “found” the object of my search.

Even if it did me no good at all.

Just after midnight – as the novelty was wearing off, and I was finally making up my mind to leave – some of the dancers began cheering loudly again. This time it took me even longer to see why. People started turning to face the east, and excitedly pointing something out to each other.

Weaving through one of the distant crowds of dancers – in a village three screens removed – were a number of human figures. They might have been naked, some male some female, but it was hard to be sure: they could only be seen in glimpses... and they were shining so brightly that most details were swamped in their sheer luminosity.

They glowed an intense silver-white. The light trans-

formed their immediate surroundings – though the effect was more like a halo of luminous gas, diffusing through the air, than a spotlight cast on the crowd. The dancers around them seemed oblivious to their presence – as did those in the intervening halls; only the people in Herodotus paid them the kind of attention their spectacular appearance deserved. I couldn’t yet tell whether they were pure animation, with plausible paths computed through gaps in the crowd, or unremarkable (but real) actors, enhanced by software.

My mouth was dry. I couldn’t believe that the presence of these silver figures could be pure coincidence – but what were they meant to signify? Did the people of Herodotus know about the string of local outbreaks? That wasn’t impossible; an independent analysis might have been circulated on the net. Maybe this was meant as some kind of bizarre “tribute” to the victims.

I found Oliver again. The music had softened, as if in deference to the vision, and he seemed to have come down a little; we managed to have something approaching a conversation.

I pointed to the figures – who were now marching smoothly straight through the image of the image of a wall-screen, proving themselves entirely virtual.

He shouted, “They’re walking the trail of happiness!”

I mimed incomprehension.

“Healing the land for us! Making amends! Undoing the trail of tears!”

The trail of tears? I was lost for a while, then a memory from high school surfaced abruptly. The “Trail of Tears” was the brutal forced march of the Cherokee from what was now part of Georgia, all the way to Oklahoma, in the 1830s. Thousands had died along the way; some had escaped, and hidden in the Appalachians. Herodotus, I was fairly sure, was hundreds of kilometres from the historical route of the march – but that didn’t seem to be the point. As the silver figures moved across the dance floor twice-removed, I could see them spreading their arms wide, as if performing some kind of benediction.

I shouted, “But what does *Silver Fire* have to do with – ?”

“Their bodies are frozen – so their spirits are free to walk the Trail of Happiness through cyberspace for us! Didn’t you know? That’s what *Silver Fire* is *for*! To renew everything! To bring happiness to the land! *To make amends!*” Oliver beamed at me with absolute sincerity, radiating pure good will.

I stared at him in disbelief. This man, clearly, hated no one... but what he’d just spewed out was nothing but a New Age remix of the rantings of that radio evangelist, 20 years before, who’d seized upon AIDS as the incontrovertible proof of his own *spiritual* beliefs.

I shouted angrily, “*Silver Fire* is a merciless, agonizing –”

Oliver tipped his head back and laughed, uproariously, without a trace of malice – as if I was the one telling ghost stories.

I turned and walked away.

The trail-walkers split into two streams as they crossed the hall immediately to the east of us. Half went north, half went south, as they “detoured around” Herodotus. They couldn’t move among us –

but this way, the illusion remained almost seamless.

And if I'd been drugged out of my skull? If I'd embraced the whole mythology of the Trail of Happiness – and come here hoping to see it confirmed? In the morning, would I have half-believed that the roaming spirits of Silver Fire patients had marched right past me?

Bestowing their luminous blessing on the crowd.

Near enough to touch.

I threaded my way towards the camouflaged exit. Outside, the cool air and the silence were surreal; I felt more disembodied and dreamlike than ever. I staggered towards the car park, and waved my notepad to make the hire car flash its lights.

My head cleared as I approached the highway. I decided to drive on through the night; I was so agitated that I didn't think I had much chance of sleeping. I could find a motel in the morning, shower, and catch a nap before my next appointment.

I still didn't know what to make of the Event – what solid link there could be between the carrier and the villagers' mad syncretic cyberbabble. If it was nothing but coincidence, the irony was grotesque – but what was the alternative? *Some "pilgrim" on the Trail of Happiness, deliberately spreading the virus?* The idea was ludicrous – and not just because it was unthinkable obscene. A carrier could only *know* that he or she had been infected if distinctive symptoms had appeared... but *distinctive symptoms* only marked the brutal end stage of the disease; a prolonged mild infection – if such a thing existed – would be indistinguishable from influenza. Once Silver Fire progressed far enough to affect the visible layers of the skin, the only options for cross-country travel all involved flashing lights and sirens.

At about half past three in the morning, I switched on my notepad. I wasn't exactly drowsy, but I wanted something to keep me alert.

Ariadne had plenty.

First, a heated debate on *The Reality Studio* – a program on the Inter-campus Ideas Network. A freelance zoologist from Seattle named Andrew Feld spoke first – putting the case that Silver Fire "proved beyond doubt" his "controversial and paradigm-subverting" S-force theory of life, which "combined the transgressive genius of Einstein and Shel-drake with the insights of the Maya and the latest developments in super-

strings, to create a new, life-affirming biology to take the place of soulless, mechanistic Western science."

In reply, virologist Margaret Ortega from UCLA explained in detail why Feld's ideas were superfluous, failed to account for – or clashed directly with – numerous observed biological phenomena... and were neither more nor less "mechanistic" than any other theory which didn't leave everything in the universe to the whim of God. She also ventured the opinion that most people were capable of *affirming life* without casually discarding all of human knowledge in the process.

Feld was a clueless idiot on a wish-fulfilment trip. Ortega wiped the floor with him.

But when the nationwide audience of students voted, he was declared winner by a majority of two to one.

Next item: Protesters were blockading the Medical Research Laboratories of the Max Planck Institute

in Hamburg, calling for an end to Silver Fire research. Safety was not the issue. Protest organizer and "acclaimed cultural agitator" Kid Ransom had held an impromptu press conference:

"We must reclaim Silver Fire from the grey, small-minded scientists, and learn to tap its well-spring of mythical power for the benefit of all humanity! These technocrats who seek to *explain* everything are like vandals rampaging through a gallery, scrawling equations on all the beautiful works of art!"

"But how will humanity ever find a cure for this disease, without research?"

"There is no such thing as disease! There is only transformation!"

There were four more news stories, all concerning (mutually exclusive) proclamations about the "secret truth" (or secret ineffability) behind Silver Fire – and maybe each one, alone, would have seemed no more than a sad, sick joke. But as the countryside materialized around me – the purple-grey ridge of the Black Mountains to the north starkly beautiful in the dawn – I was slowly beginning to understand. *This was not my world any more.* Not in Herodotus, not in Seattle, not in Hamburg or Montreal or London. Not even in New York.

In my world, there were no nymphs in trees and streams. No gods, no ghosts, no ancestral spirits. *Nothing* – outside our own cultures, our own laws, our own passions – existed in order to punish us or



comfort us, to affirm any act of hatred or love.

My own parents had understood this, perfectly – but theirs had been the first generation, ever, to be so free of the shackles of superstition. And after the briefest flowering of understanding, my own generation had grown complacent. At some level, we must have started taking it for granted that *the way the universe worked* was now obvious to any child... even though it went against everything innate to the species: the wild, undisciplined love of patterns, the craving to extract meaning and comfort from everything in sight.

We thought we were passing on everything that mattered to our children: science, history, literature, art. Vast libraries of information lay at their fingertips. But we hadn't fought hard enough to pass on the hardest-won truth of all: *Morality comes only from within. Meaning comes only from within. Outside our own skulls, the universe is indifferent.*

Maybe, in the West, we'd delivered the death blows to the old doctrinal religions, the old monoliths of delusion... but that victory meant nothing at all.

Because taking their place now, everywhere, was the saccharine poison of *spirituality*.

I checked into a motel in Asheville. The parking lot was full of campervans, people heading for the national parks; I was lucky, I got the last room.

My notepad chimed while I was in the shower. An analysis of the latest data reported to the Centres for Disease Control showed the "anomaly" extending almost 200 kilometres further west along the I-40 – about half-way to Nashville. *Five more people on the Trail of Happiness.* I sat and stared at the map for a while – then I dressed, packed my bag again, and checked out.

I made ten calls as I was driving up into the mountains, cancelling all my appointments with relatives from Asheville to Jefferson City, Tennessee. The time had passed for being cautious and methodical, for gathering every last scrap of data along the way. I *knew* the transmission had to be taking place at the Events – the only question was whether it was accidental or deliberate.

Deliberate how? With a vial full of fibroblasts, teeming with Silver Fire? It had taken researchers at the NIH over a year to learn how to culture the virus – and they'd only succeeded in March. I couldn't believe that their work had been replicated by amateurs in less than three months.

The highway plunged between the lavish wooded slopes of the Great Smoky Mountains, following the Pigeon River most of the way. I programmed a predictive model – by voice – as I drove. I had a calendar for the Events, now, and I had five approximate dates of infection. Case notifications would always be too late; the only way to catch up was to extrapolate. And I could only assume that the carrier would continue moving steadily westwards, never lingering, always travelling on to the next Event.

I reached Knoxville around midday, stopped for lunch, then drove straight on.

The model said: *Pliny, Saturday Jan 14, 9.30 pm.* My first chance to search the infinite dance hall for the

carrier, without an impassable wall between us.

My first chance to be in the presence of Silver Fire.

I arrived early – but not so early as to attract the attention of Pliny's equivalents of Sally and Oliver. I stayed in the car for an hour, improvising ways to look busy, recording the licence numbers of arriving vehicles. There were a lot of four-wheel drives and utilities, and a few campervans. Many villagers favoured bicycles – but the carrier would have to have been a real fanatic – and extremely fit – to have cycled all the way from Greensboro.

The Event followed much the same pattern as the one in Herodotus the night before – though Herodotus himself wasn't taking part. The crowd was similar, too: mostly young, but with enough exceptions to keep me from looking completely out of place. I wandered around, trying to commit every face to memory without attracting too much attention. *Had all these people swallowed the Silver Fire myth, as I'd heard it from Oliver?* The possibility was almost too bleak to contemplate. The only thing that gave me any hope was that when I'd compared the number of villages listed on the Event calendar with the number in the region, it was less than one in 20. The microvillage movement itself had nothing to do with this insanity.

Someone offered me a pink capsule – not for free, this time. I gave her 20 dollars, and pocketed the drug for analysis. There was a slender chance that someone was passing out doctored capsules – although stomach acid tended to make short work of the virus.

A handsome blond kid – barely in his 20s – hovered around me for a while as the trail-walkers appeared. When they'd vanished into the west, he approached me, took my elbow, and made an offer I couldn't quite hear over the music – though I thought I got the gist of it. I was too distracted to feel amazed or flattered – let alone tempted – and I got rid of him in five seconds flat. He walked away looking wounded – but not long afterwards, I saw him leaving with a woman half my age.

I stayed to the very end – and on Saturday nights, that meant five in the morning. I staggered out into the light, discouraged, although I didn't know what I'd seriously hoped to see. *Someone walking around with an aerosol spray, administering doses of Silver Fire?* When I reached the car park I realized that many of the cars had arrived after I'd gone in – and some might have come and gone unseen. I recorded the licence plates I'd missed, trying to be discreet, but almost past caring; I hadn't slept for 36 hours.

The nearest Event west of Pliny, on Sunday night, was past the Mississippi and half-way across Arkansas; I made a calculated guess that the carrier would take this as an opportunity for a night off.

Monday evening, I drove into Eudoxus – population 165, established 2002, about an hour from Nashville – ready to spend all night in the car park if I had to. I needed to record every licence plate, or there wasn't much point being here.

I hadn't told Brecht what I was doing; I still had no solid evidence, and I was afraid of sounding paranoid. I'd called Alex before leaving Nashville, but I hadn't told him

much, either. Laura had declined to speak to me when he'd called out and told her I was on the line, but that was nothing new. I missed them both already, more than I'd anticipated – but I wasn't sure how I'd manage when I finally made it home, to a daughter who was turning away from reason, and a husband who took it for granted that any bright adolescent would recapitulate five thousand years of intellectual progress in six months.

Thirty-five vehicles arrived between ten and eleven – none I'd seen before – and then the flow tapered off abruptly. I scanned the entertainment channels on my notepad, satisfied by anything with colour and movement; I'd had enough of Ariadne's bad news.

Just before midnight, a blue Ford campervan rolled up and parked in the corner opposite me. A young man and a young woman got out; they seemed excited, but a little wary – as if they couldn't quite believe that their parents weren't watching from the shadows.

As they crossed the car park, I realized that the guy was the blond kid who'd spoken to me in Pliny.

I waited five minutes, then went and checked their licence plate; it was a Massachusetts registration. I hadn't recorded it on Saturday night, so I would have missed the fact that they were following the Trail, if one of them hadn't –

Hadn't what?

I stood there frozen behind the van, trying to stay calm, replaying the incident in my mind. I knew I hadn't let him paw me for long – *but how long would it have taken?*

I glanced up at the disinterested stars, trying to savour the irony because it tasted much better than the fear. I'd always known there'd be a risk – and the odds were still heavily in my favour. I could put myself into quarantine in Nashville in the morning; nothing I did right now would make the slightest difference –

But I wasn't thinking straight. If they'd *travelled together* all the way from Massachusetts – or even from Greensboro – one should have infected the other long ago. The probability of the two of them sharing the same freakish resistance to the virus was negligible, even if they were brother and sister.

They couldn't both be unwitting, asymptomatic carriers. So either they had nothing to do with the outbreaks –

– *or they were transporting the virus outside their bodies, and handling it with great care.*

A bumper sticker boasted: STATE-OF-THE-ART SECURITY! I placed a hand against the rear door experimentally; the van didn't emit so much as a warning beep. I tried shaking the handle aggressively; still nothing. If the system was calling a security firm in Nashville for an armed response, I had all the time I needed. If it was trying to call its owners, it wouldn't have much luck getting a signal through the aluminium frame of the village hall.

There was no one in sight. I went back to my car, and fetched the toolkit.

I knew I had no legal right. There were emergency powers I could have invoked – but I had no intention of calling Maryland and spending half the night fighting my way through the correct procedures. And I knew I was putting the prosecution case at risk, by

tainting everything with illegal search and seizure.

I didn't care. They weren't going to have the chance to send one more person down the Trail of Happiness, even if I had to burn the van to the ground.

I levered a small, tinted fixed window out of its rubber frame in the door. Still no wailing siren. I reached in, groped around, and unlocked the door.

I'd thought they must have been half-educated biochemists, who'd learnt enough cytology to duplicate the published fibroblast culturing techniques.

I was wrong. They were medical students, and they'd half-learnt other skills entirely.

They had their friend cushioned in polymer gel, contained in something like a huge tropical fish tank. They had oxygen set up, a urethral catheter, and half a dozen drips. I played my torch beam over the inverted bottles, checking the various drugs and their concentrations. I went through them all twice, hoping I'd missed one – but I hadn't.

I shone the beam down onto the girl's skinless white face, peering through the delicate streamers of red rising up through the gel. She was in an opiate haze deep enough to keep her motionless and silent – but she was still conscious. Her mouth was frozen in a rictus of pain.

And she'd been like this for 16 days.

I staggered back out of the van, my heart pounding, my vision going black. I collided with the blond kid; the girl was with him, and they had another couple in tow.

I turned on him and started punching him, screaming incoherently; I don't remember what I said. He put up his hands to shield his face, and the others came to his aid: pinning me gently against the van, holding me still without striking a single blow.

I was crying now. The campervan girl said, "Sssh. It's all right. No one's going to hurt you."

I pleaded with her. "Don't you understand? She's in pain! *All this time, she's been in pain!* What did you think she was doing? *Smiling?*"

"Of course she's smiling. This is what she always wanted. She made us promise that if she ever caught Silver Fire, she'd walk the Trail."

I rested my head against the cool metal, closed my eyes for a moment, and tried to think of a way to get through to them.

But I didn't know how.

When I opened my eyes, the boy was standing in front of me. He had the most gentle, compassionate face imaginable. He wasn't a torturer, or a bigot, or even a fool. He'd just swallowed some beautiful lies.

He said, "Don't you understand? *All you see in there is a woman dying in pain – but we all have to learn to see more.* The time has come to regain the lost skills of our ancestors: the power to see visions, demons and angels. The power to see the spirits of the wind and the rain. The power to walk the Trail of Happiness."

Greg Egan is the deserving winner of this year's John W. Campbell Memorial Award for his novel *Permutation City* (Millennium, 1994). He is an Australian, born in 1961, and doesn't divulge much about himself – though we heartily recommend the one-and-only interview with him that appeared in *Interzone* 73.

The Warrior **HALF & FLAH**

Chris Beckett

"That's the North Fortress down on the right," said the ornithopter pilot.

A huge grey wave burst against a desolate concrete gun-platform, flinging up a column of spray hundreds of feet into the air. Then another wave threw itself against the fortress – and another and another. Dwarfed by the ocean, the tiny figures of soldiers looked up at us as we passed.

The North Fortress was one of four that guarded the prison island of Gendlegap. An armed airship circled constantly above them. Another airship circled ten miles further out. A satellite hung overhead in space. Five hundred miles away to the East at our bases on the bleak Phrygidian coast, and to the West in Anachromia, fighter planes and transporters stood in a state of constant readiness, ready to blast into the air at any sign of an escape attempt or a rescue bid...

The ornithopter banked and turned.

"There it is now sir," the pilot said.

Gannets and petrels swirling around it, spray lashing its basalt cliffs, the bleak sea-mountain of Gendlegap came into view. I steeled myself for my imminent encounter with the legendary Half-and-Half, the island's solitary prisoner. What state would he be in after a century of solitary confinement? How would I react when I first saw him? How would I feel when he first opened his mouth to speak?

The ornithopter descended towards the landing pad, and the little windswept reception party came into view among the concrete buildings huddled at the island's desolate peak. It was a great honour, of course, to have been chosen by the Emperor for this mission but my feelings now were very mixed indeed.

More than anything else, I wondered how I could look a man in the eye that had betrayed the Empire so wantonly to our enemies. This was the most famous traitor in our history. And I was a devout Eninometric. Treachery, to me, was the one unforgivable sin.

The ornithopter settled. I adjusted my uniform, fastening the top button of my white jacket and straightening my medals. Then I nodded to Sergeant Tobias. He opened the door. With a cold blast, the Antarctic winds swept in – and a small band struck up, somewhat shakily, the Imperial Anthem.

I emerged into the gale. The governor saluted. I inspected a small guard of honour. The governor introduced his staff officers to me in rank order, and began a speech of welcome.

"Major-Cardinal Illucian, may I say..." and here he stumbled over his words, "may I say how honoured we are..."

Major-Cardinal Illucian. Yes, that was me. I was only 30 years old but I was a high-ranking officer of the Pristine Guard, dedicated by solemn vow to the service of His Imperial Majesty, and to the Holy doctrine of Eninomesis.

The Guard demanded great sacrifices. My home, such as it was, consisted of two small white-washed rooms which I inhabited alone. I didn't smoke, or drink, or eat meat. Every time I went out into the City and saw the colour and the cheerful bustle of ordinary sinful human life, I felt a pang of regret and of longing.

But someone had to bear the extra burdens that others shirked, I always told myself. Otherwise the Empire itself would surely fall and all this colourful life would come to an end, like a kite tumbling from the sky when its cord has been severed.

And, let me be honest, there were compensations, moments of quiet pride, moments such as this one, when the whole garrison of Gendlegap visibly quailed before me, the Pristine officer, stern and austere in my uniform of immaculate white.

"We haven't seen him for nearly ten years," the governor told me, as he led the way down the narrow spiral staircase. "There has been no occasion to do so, not since those academicians came to interview him about his immortality. Of course we monitor him constantly. He goes into a kind of suspended animation. There is no body-warmth, no nervous activity, no breathing..."

The Immortal Warrior was incarcerated a hundred feet down in the solid rock. The only access to him were these stairs cut through the grim black basalt and sealed by a series of eight iron doors, the seventh of which the governor was now unlocking.

Cold arc-lights illuminated the descending steps beyond the door. I followed the governor through. Behind us came my sergeant, Tobias, and three of the garrison soldiers.

"Well, I assume there is no breathable air in there," I observed, "if it is ten years since it was last opened."

"Indeed, your Holiness. But the strange thing – the uncanny thing really – is that he springs to life at once when we disturb him. His nervous system has completely shut down, yet he responds instantaneously to a change in the outside world!"

I shrugged. "I suppose there is very little about Half-and-Half that can be explained," I said, "his origins, his shape-shifting, his apparently magical powers..."

In times past, pieces of the Immortal Warrior had even been cut off and examined by science – a finger, a hand, a leg. But as soon as they are separated from him, his tissues disintegrate completely, only to reappear later, re-formed in some mysterious way, inexplicably re-united to Half-and-Half himself.

"A complete mystery, your Holiness," the governor agreed, opening the last of the eight barrier doors. "Of course, he himself is *full* of fanciful explanations if you give him half a chance."

"I do not intend to do so," I said drily.

But I was not quite as calm as I appeared. As the door of his cell came into view, I confess I experienced a moment of pure childish dread at the prospect of facing this being who could be burnt in furnaces, torn into a hundred pieces, and still not be destroyed*.

"He is not invincible," I reminded myself, "even if he is immortal. He can be chained. He can be held. He can make mistakes..."

He could certainly make mistakes. Or otherwise he would never have allowed himself to fall back into the hands of the Old Emperor, after he had betrayed him so treacherously to the Hippolytians at the Battle of the Mill.

The light sprang on as the enormous door swung open.

Laden with chains, the prisoner of Gendlegap squatted in the corner of a tiny metal-lined cell that looked and smelled like an empty water-tank. His head was between his knees. He was as angular and motionless as a dead spider.

Half-and-Half the magical warrior, Half-and-Half the traitor – for several generations, every child in the Empire had been told the story of his exploits and his disgrace. But how many expected ever to stand there in that cell, faced with the mysterious Warrior himself?

He was quite small, dark-haired, swarthy. I had seen pictures of him of course and should not have been surprised. And yet somehow it was hard to believe that this ordinary-looking prisoner, with the rough skin of a middle-aged bricklayer or peasant, could have been the same one who over a century ago struck terror into the barbarian armies with his shape-shifting illusions.

Just barely perceptibly, Half-and-Half moved. He was alert, he was listening, though his head was

weighed down by the heavy iron collar round his neck, and he did not look up.

I cleared my throat. I felt suddenly ridiculous stooping there next to the governor in that tiny tank-like space.

"Prisoner Half-and-Half," I began, "His Imperial Majesty has asked me to convey to you this message. In exchange for your assistance in his current wars, he would be willing to grant you, temporarily, your freedom. Depending on your conduct during the period of these wars, His Majesty would also be willing to contemplate in due course granting you a full pardon for the crimes committed by you in the service of His great-grandfather."

There was a long silence. Then very suddenly Half-and-Half sat up straight and looked at us. His eyes were very bright, full of energy and cunning and wit. And he just looked at us, a faint teasing smile slowly appearing on his lips.

Well, I am a soldier of the Pristine Guard. I have looked death in the face many times. But it was a struggle now – why not admit it? – to keep myself from lowering my gaze.

"Speak, damn you!" I thought, "Speak!"

At last he nodded slowly. "Yes," he said and his voice was quite ordinary and human, "Yes, I will speak with the Emperor."

"You will agree to his terms?"

"I will speak to him."

"But we need to discuss the terms of your service before we can..."

The prisoner made a small gesture of impatience, with a right hand laden with heavy rings of black iron. "I said I would speak to the Emperor."

As the ornithopter lifted, Half-and-Half twisted his chained body to look back at the rock where he had languished for so long. Then he turned to me with that clever, mischievous smile

"Well, that was no picnic, I can tell you! No air, no food, no space..."

The sea-lashed platform of the North Fortress passed by beneath us.

"I mean," said Half-and-Half, "you're a vigorous-looking young man. Never mind food or drink. Imagine going for a whole *century* without sex!"

I informed him – rather stiffly – that the Pristine Guard was a celibate order.

"Celibate eh?" he said. "Well, well. So virgin soldiers are back in vogue again are they? *Plus ça change!* Still, there's certainly something in the idea, I must admit. The virgin soldiers always were the most ruthless fighters. They long for release all the time, I suppose!"

I declined to reply to this nonsense. Half-and-Half was clearly a master of establishing the upper hand. I was determined to prove to him that he had met his match.

But my silence did little to discourage him. He laughed and continued his train of thought.

"In fact," he said, "I've heard it said that death is the ultimate orgasm, though I'm afraid I just have to struggle by with the ordinary kind."

Again I didn't respond. And we sat for some time in silence.

But over the coast of Anachromia, as we looked down on the thousands upon thousands of grey sea-lions that covered the beaches, the Immortal Warrior chuckled.

"So the Emperor thinks he can make use of me, does he? Doesn't he know how I got my name? I'm Half-and-Half! Whoever I serve, whoever I have dealings with, I do them just as much harm as I do good, and just as much good as harm."

"I think His Majesty is sufficiently confident in His own authority," I said, drily, "to believe that he can channel your capabilities in the right direction."

(After all, His Majesty's armies made use of all kinds of technologies and weapons which could be used against us just as effectively as they could be used in our defence. The trick was to ensure you were in control.)

"Well," said Half-and-Half, "I wish I had a penny for every time someone managed to convince themselves that they could 'channel me in the right direction!'"

He made a small exasperated gesture. "It can't be done! Why can't these kings and emperors get that through their heads? I'm the love-child of an angel and a demon, I'm light and darkness in exactly equal proportions. Don't they tell the story any more? There was an illicit union between good and evil at the beginning of time – and I was the result. I'm immortal, I'm full of hybrid vigour, but I'm a moral zero. It's just not negotiable, it's a law of the universe like the speed of light. You can imprison me or make me General-Supreme, in the end it'll make no odds. You might just as well let me sit on the sea-shore and count shells." The Immortal Warrior snorted, giving a glance down at the bare Anachromian Ridge as it fell behind us. In the rocks down there, so I'd heard, were remnants of cities so old that they had fossilized, become part of the bones of the Earth itself. Yet, if the stories about him were true, Half-and-Half had existed even then, sometimes disappearing for years or even centuries, but always reappearing in some new guise.

Now his chains clinked.

"Not that I'm complaining," he said. "If your Emperor has managed to persuade himself he can use me, that's fine with me. I have *no* desire to spend another hundred years under that damned rock."

"Things have changed since you were last at large," I said. "This is a scientific age. No one will take seriously all this talk of demons and angels."

His merry, mocking eyes turned back to my face. "It was a scientific age when they locked me up," he said, "but they still believed in Eninomesis."

"That has not changed," I said, quietly and firmly.

"You still believe in the prophet Enino and how he descended to the Ultimate Core in a wheel of burning light?"

"Of course," I said.

He smiled. "But that's different," I added.

"Is it? Oh, I see."

In spite of his chains, he gave a dismissive shrug

and looked away.

But he didn't remain silent for long. "Did you know I was with Enino for a while?" he asked. "He was another one who thought he could reform me. A vain man, he was. Do you know how I remember him best? In front of the mirror with a pair of tweezers! He had this incredibly vigorous growth of nostril hair, and..."

"*Silence!*" I interrupted him. "Show respect to the Holy Prophet or I will have you gagged."

"Fair enough," said Half-and-Half with his shrug and his mocking smile, looking back out of the window.

"I am the son of an angel and a demon," he repeated very quietly to himself, rather as a child will mutter defiantly when it has been told off. "The Norse knew me as Loki. The Chinese called me the Monkey King. One way or another, though, I seem to keep on getting buried under mountains."

He looked round at me slyly. "The American Indians, they knew me *very* well. They weren't preoccupied with Progress like you urban people are, so they found me less of a problem. They gave me lots of different names..."

I drew in breath. "I really do not wish to hear the names that extinct or imaginary races are supposed to have called you. I merely repeat: this is a scientific age."

He looked at me. "A scientific age eh?"

His eyes were bright and fierce under his dark brows. "But my immortality is a *fact*, isn't it?" he said. "I've just lived for a hundred years without food or air or drink. How does your science explain *that*?"

"Well..." I began and found myself stumbling. "Well, there are plenty of theories... To do with parachemistry at the sub-atomic level... To do with non-local forces... Apparently there are spores in space which display a similar ability to reconstruct, and to..."

"Yes, yes," said Half-and-Half impatiently, "but do you actually *understand* any of this?"

"Well, it's not an area in which I really – um – have any specialist knowledge," I began, "but..."

Half-and-Half laughed. "No, I thought not!" he said.

He settled back in his seat, winking at me jovially, as if I'd just failed to pull off an ingenious joke at his expense.

We were crossing the Ontibian Alps when he spoke again.

"I suppose you're furious with me for selling out to the Hippolytanians all those years ago?" he asked. "I've noticed your type never forgives that sort of thing."

I remained silent and looked away.

He nodded. "I thought so. A fine young, tight young virgin soldier like you!"

"Thousands died as a result of your treachery," I said quietly.

"So they say. The Battle of the Mill was lost without me and thousands of Imperial soldiers died who might otherwise have lived."

He shrugged, clinking. "Of course, if it had been

thousands of Hippolytanians who had died, you'd have called me a hero. But I saved Hippolytanian lives."

The Immortal Warrior made a small, contemptuous gesture. "You're all such babies aren't you? I've been around since the beginning of time. I've seen nations come and go, I've seen religions and political systems come and go that were supposed to be the answer to everything. I've seen whole *continents* come and go. How could you possibly expect it to mean anything to me when you draw one of those stupid lines across a map and say it's good to kill the people on one side of it and bad to kill the people on the other? Listen, I'm a mercenary. I fight in my own interests. And the Hippolytanians offered me a better deal."

He looked at me, his fierce, angry eyes mocking my own suppressed rage. "And what do *you* fight for, Cardinal-Major Illucian?" he asked me.

I said nothing.

"I'll tell you," he said. "You fight so that everyone will tell you what a good boy you are for holding all your shit tight up inside you, and only ever crapping it out in the special receptacle that daddy provides."

I wasn't going to rise to this. I indicated to Sergeant Tobias that he should take my place, then went forward to stand by the pilot.

We were crossing the Southern Marches. Far off in the hazy distance the green hills of our beloved homeland were already coming into view.

"So *this* is the famous Half-and-Half!" exclaimed the Emperor, as I led the chained prisoner into the throne-room.

His Serene Majesty sat on a high throne like a stage, surrounded by protective fields of force that bathed him in a strange pearly light. I knelt and prostrated myself, but the Immortal Warrior merely nodded at the planet's supreme potentate as you might nod at some tradesman in the street.

"The Cardinal-Major has no doubt told you our proposal," the Emperor said, letting this insolence pass without comment, "and I understand that His Excellency the Minister of Peace-through-War has also now met you and outlined our position. So what is your reply? Will you promise to serve me for the duration of the war in return for your freedom? Or do you prefer to return to your cell on Gendlegap?"

The Immortal Warrior ran his tongue over his lower lip.

"No one would stay on Gendlegap out of choice," he said. "So naturally I promise to serve you to the best of my ability. I've already explained to Illucian here about why I'm known as Half-and-Half. But I would imagine that you've convinced yourself that you'll be able to..."

His Majesty laughed comfortably. "Oh I have no illusions about your loyalties, Half-and-Half, no illusions at all. But I think we can do business. I think —" (and here the words came out so glibly that I felt like calling out some kind of warning) "— I think, one way or another, we'll be able to channel you in the right direction."

Half-and-Half laughed. "That's what they all say..." he began, but here I interrupted him.

"You are in the presence of His Majesty the Emperor, Half-and-Half!" I hissed.

He looked at me and back at the Emperor. "I know I am in the presence of the Emperor," said the prisoner of Gendlegap, without lowering his voice. "And *he* is in the presence of the warrior Half-and-Half, who helped his great-great-grandfather murder old Nanophea and so usurp the throne..."

"Silence!" I ordered.

But his Majesty merely observed, quite mildly, that he did not want Half-and-Half to talk about the past, mythical or otherwise, while in his service.

"Is that understood?" he enquired. "I want that to be part of our deal."

"Perfectly," said Half-and-Half, with an ironic snapping of his heels to attention, which set his chains clanking loudly. "That's *always* been part of the deal. I must not disturb the rosy mists of the past!"

His Majesty smiled at him, as if they had shared a private joke. Then he gave a signal to one of his guards, who went to a side door and ushered in the grey, aquiline figure of the Minister of Peace-through-War, accompanied by an aide carrying a small box.

"Half-and-Half," said the Emperor, "you are an impudent man, and you obviously think you can outsmart us all. But things have changed since you last walked the Earth, things have moved on. We understand, perhaps better than ever before, how your strange body works."

I think His Majesty expected Half-and-Half to look impressed, or even alarmed that his secret was finally out. But the Immortal Warrior said nothing, merely smiled his faint sceptical smile, just as he had done with me when I had attempted to advance those fashionable theories about para-chemistry and non-local forces.

"Yes, we have new tools at our disposal now," said the Minister of Peace-through-War. "Bullets can smash tissue and fire can smash molecules. Nuclear fission can even smash atoms. But now, for the first time, we have a means to destroy even sub-atomic particles, reducing them to pure energy."

His Serene Majesty nodded. "Yes, Half-and-Half, and I don't think even *your* strange flesh could reconstruct itself after such total annihilation."

The prisoner of Gendlegap said nothing.

The Emperor gestured to the Minister's aide, who opened the box he carried and removed from it a heavy metal bracelet. "We have been using these subatomic bombs on the battlefield for several years now," said the Minister, "and we have acquired some skill in miniaturization. This bracelet is in fact such a weapon."

The Emperor smiled. "You can be held, we know, Half-and-Half," he said, "you cannot escape from secure bonds. We're going to fix this bracelet to you. If you tamper with it, it will destroy you. If you disobey me, I will destroy you, for I personally hold a control device for this thing. And if you harm *me*, the Minister here will destroy you, for he also holds the key to your instant annihilation. This is how I will ensure your loyalty. Is that understood?"

Half-and-Half nodded, still faintly smiling. The Emperor made a gesture to the Minister, who nodded

to his aide. The aide fastened the bracelet onto the prisoner's upper arm.

"Very well then," said His Majesty. "Remove his chains if you please, Cardinal-Major!"

My guards came forward to release the locks in Half-and-Half's collar and manacles. The chains fell away to the floor and the Immortal Warrior stood there, unfettered for the first time since before my grandfather was born. Tentatively he felt his wrists, his ankles, his neck. He smiled. He touched the heavy bracelet that had just been fastened round his arm.

Then suddenly he performed a series of cartwheels across the throne-room. It was so unexpected that we all lowered halberds or whipped out hand-guns.

"That feels *good*!" exclaimed Half-and-Half, coming to a halt.

Sheepishly, we replaced our weapons. Only the Emperor behind his protective field seemed to have remained calm. Leaning forward, as if the better to enjoy the show, he clapped his hands and called out "Encore!"

So then Half-and-Half performed a series of flying somersaults – one, two...

But the third one was different. Half-way through it, he stopped, he became motionless, suspended three feet off the ground. We all gasped – the Emperor, the guards, all of us – as he hung there for five seconds or more. And then, equally abruptly, he darted sideways, from that motionless mid-air position, generating momentum from nowhere. He darted sideways, snatched my weapon from its holster and flung it down at my feet, while he himself landed effortlessly beside me, smiling, without a wobble, without any sign of breathlessness or strain.

"Come on!" he called to the Emperor's guards. "Attack me with your halberds!"

They hesitated.

"No. Go on. Do your worst. I won't hurt you."

The guards glanced up at His Majesty, who nodded, smiling broadly.

Clumsily, feeling afraid and feeling like fools at the same time, the two guards converged on him, their halberds lowered.

"Come on! Run!" shouted Half-and-Half.

They ran.

And suddenly Half-and-Half had vanished. There was only a single golden butterfly hovering in the space where he had been.

The guards clattered to a stop, just in time to prevent themselves from impaling one another. The butterfly flew upwards...

...and then crashed to the ground, transformed into an enormous, fiery red lion. It lashed left and right, it roared. As the guards backed away, it struck their halberds from their hands with its great paws and sent them clattering across the floor...

And then Half-and-Half was back again in human form, looking up at the Emperor with a friendly wink. "There!" he said. "You can see I haven't lost my touch!"

"Indeed!" said His Majesty, laughing. "Indeed! But I also see that my bracelet of annihilation is still securely in place!"

He clapped his hands to bring the audience to a close.

"Very well then, Cardinal-Major. Thankyou for your assistance with this. Take this fellow away and get him out of those dreadful breeches and into some sort of decent outfit that will reassure your fellow-officers. He can come to my war cabinet this afternoon. We're in very serious trouble just now, I'm afraid. Those damned Antinomians are making fools of us all along the Eastern front. I'm losing a lot of territory, not to mention about a thousand soldiers a day. We need some new ideas – and quickly. We need some sort of encouragement."

A metal screen slid down in front of the throne and the Emperor and his pearly light were gone. I led the Immortal Warrior down the famous Amber Stairs, and across the Court of Roses.

Half-and-Half the traitor was to be accommodated in the House of Honour.

That is politics I suppose.

"You see?" he said, as we passed among the roses. "They just won't accept it, even when I tell it to them straight! Once they see what I can do, they refuse to believe that they'd be just as well off without me."

We passed down the Corridor of the Succession with its long series of portraits of Emperors and Empresses past. Half-and-Half smiled. "Still," he said, "I *like* this Emperor. He's fun."

He made no mention of the bracelet and, when I spoke of it, he touched it vaguely with his fingers and moved on to other things. I couldn't help admiring his sangfroid.

"Tell me," I asked him, "How did you do those tricks?"

The Immortal Warrior smiled. "Hypnotism, sleight of hand, mirrors, very good balance – take your pick!" He winked at me. "There's no point at all in my telling you how it *really* works. You wouldn't believe me. This is a scientific age after all!"

He laughed. To my own surprise, I found myself smiling.

Half-and-Half looked at me sharply. "There's quite a pleasant fellow under that stiff exterior, I shouldn't wonder," he said after a moment, "quite a good-looking fellow too. Maybe you should think of chucking in this Pristine nonsense and having a bit of fun for a change? After all, you only live once. Unless, of course, you're me."

We crossed the Court of Fountains and reached the entrance of the House of Honour. Flunkies came out to greet the Immortal Warrior. My role was at an end. We said goodbye.

"Take a leaf from my book," said Half-and-Half. "Whatever I do, life will go on the same. So I might as well do whatever I like."

He smiled. "I won't say that it always works out for me as a philosophy of living, but half of the time it works out fine.

I turned to go.

"Do you know what I've missed most of all?" I heard him say to the flunkies. "It's not food, it's not drink. It's..."

And then the door closed behind him.

My duties completed, I left the Palace and crossed the teeming city. I smelt the city smells of spices and cooked meat and excrement and sweet cakes and rotten vegetables. I heard the angry shouts and the love-songs and the crying children. I saw the white incense smoke rising from the houses of Enino as they made ready for mid-afternoon prayers. I saw the purple ribbons fluttering in the windows of the whorehouses. I crossed the Great River and looked down at the dirty children and old women and dogs, swarming over its muddy bed, scavenging for scraps...

And I returned to my home, the barracks of the 32nd Pristine Guard. The white walls were bare, the stone courtyard swept scrupulously clean. Officers in white jackets like my own saluted and greeted me with polite deference.

"Pleased to see you, sir."

"Good to have you back, your Holiness."

I was suddenly very tired. I couldn't face eating with my subordinates that night. I asked for some bread and cheese to be brought up to my rooms and let it be known that I would take up the reins again in the morning.

Then I retired to my quarters, my two austere rooms, with the iron bed, and the plain whitewashed walls and the single plain image of Enino, unsmiling, in the midst of his fiery wheel. Dutifully I made an obeisance, then I began to undress.

As I unbuttoned my jacket I caught sight of myself in the little mirror I use for shaving.

Tentatively, uncertainly, I smiled.

I'd never smiled at myself before. It seemed a strange thing to do. But I quite liked it. I sensed the pressure, long suppressed, of a warmer, lighter, more sensual me within...

Half-and-Half went to war. In No-man's land he danced among the bullets and laser beams. Among the ruins and the bomb craters, he laughed and performed acrobatic feats. Over the fallen corpses, he became a lion, a giant, an eagle with wings of fire. Generals and Arch-Generals stood in awe as he effortlessly absorbed information and expounded stratagems. Our soldiers cheered. They loved him for his indomitable spirit, not caring at all that he had once betrayed their own great-grandfathers. Along the whole front, they went back on the attack, full of courage and hope and new energy.

And all the while the bracelet of annihilation remained securely fixed to the Immortal Warrior's arm.

Day after day the Antinomians fell back, very often dropping their weapons and running in sheer panic. Day after day, fair-haired Philinomians ran out from their hiding places and prostrated themselves at our feet. At the Battle of the Ford, our enemies were finally routed. Their kingdoms were annexed to the Empire. Our victory was complete.

I was sent by the Emperor to grant Half-and-Half his pardon and to bring him back to the City for the celebrations. But as I drew near to his encampment, a flash of blinding white lit the sky ahead of us. The bracelet had exploded, annihilating Half-and-Half and, with him, hundreds of soldiers and the entire

mountain on which he had stood, looking out over those fertile Antinomian plains which he had added to our Emperor's realm.

Where the mountain had been there was only a huge crater, almost completely smooth, as if scooped out of butter by a gigantic spoon.

We walked up to the rim of it, Sergeant Tobias and I. It was as bare and as dead and as featureless as a crater on the moon.

"No one could survive that," Tobias muttered, "no one. Not even an Immortal."

Not long afterwards I left the Imperial service and became a merchant, dealing in military surplus, and making good use of my reputation and my contacts. I married, I became quite comfortably off, I travelled the length and breadth of the Empire making deals.

About 15 years after the Battle of the Ford, I happened to be passing through the Antinomian Borders with my new assistant Zolinda, and thought I would go up with her and take a look at the crater. (It had filled with rain over the years and become a lake). Partly I was curious: I wanted to remind myself that those strange events had really happened and not just been a dream. Partly I hoped to impress Zolinda with my stories of Half-and-Half and Gendlegap and my place in the history-books. She was an attractive woman and I wanted to sleep with her. It had worked with several others before.

So we went up to the lake known as Half-and-Half's Doom, Zolinda and I, and I told her the story, looking out over that circular expanse of lifeless water. But when I had finished, I felt strangely flat and not at all impressed by my own importance. What part had I really played after all in the story of Half-and-Half, other than the part of a dupe and a stooge?

That explosion was no accident, whatever the official story. Even as he was instructing me to fetch the Immortal Warrior, the Emperor knew quite well that I would never reach him. He hoped to cheat fate by getting the benefits of Half-and-Half's service and then eliminating him before the price had to be paid. He was – he still is – a player of games, a chancer, as amoral as Half-and-Half himself. A pure and virginal soldier like me was merely a useful foil.

But still, Zolinda was impressed. "You must be very proud, Illucian," she said. "I remember my father telling me how Half-and-Half had finally been made to serve the Emperor and win our war! I never dreamed I'd one day work for the man who was sent to fetch him from Gendlegap!"

I shrugged. "Actually I'm not so sure the Emperor *did* really benefit from Half-and-Half's service. For one thing our soldiers all loved Half-and-Half and blamed the Emperor for his death. The Emperor lost their whole-hearted loyalty and that was the beginning of the end of his power."

It was cold up there. Above the rocky bowl of Half-and-Half's Doom, the sky was heavy and grey. Zolinda suddenly put her arm in mine. Why did this give me so little pleasure?

"As for the war," I said, "we won it, I suppose, but the Antinomians have been winning the peace ever

since. Now that they are inside of the Empire, they're taking over. We even have an Antinomian in charge of the Imperial Bank!"

I turned to go, pulling free of her as I did so. "And of course the Philinomians breed like rabbits," I said, as we began to climb the rocky slope. "There isn't a street in the Empire where their pale little children aren't running about and shouting to one another in that outlandish Inglic tongue."

"But none of that is anything to do with Half-and-Half!" Zolinda protested.

"You don't think so?"

I paused to look back at the lake, surrounded by its rim of bare smooth rock.

So much for the Emperor, so much for the Empire, but what had become of me?

Well, I ate well now, I drank well, I made love as often as I could. And I was no longer thin, no longer haunted by the Eninometric ghosts of duty and sacrifice, no longer at war with my ordinary human needs.

Yet there were still times when I missed my old life in the Pristine Guard. Those austerities were once a part of me, after all. They gave me a direction, they provided me with certainties to live by.

And whatever I did, I would never recover those old certainties again.

There was a splash. Ripples spread outward from the central point of the lake.

It couldn't have been a fish. Nothing lived in that

perfectly transparent water. Someone must have thrown a stone.

Yet there was no one by the water's edge, no one at all to be seen but a small dark-haired figure far off at the very top of the opposite rim.

And surely no one could have lobbed a stone from that far. It would have been an *astonishing* feat of strength.

The concentric waves spread over the glass-like surface until no part of the lake was untouched by the impact of that single stone. But as they spread they became smaller, and soon the lake was blank and smooth once again.

The dark-haired figure seemed to be watching us. Whoever it was, he waved. I could almost imagine I saw a small, teasing smile.

But then he was gone, vanishing over the stony rim of Half-and-Half's Doom.

Chris Beckett last appeared here with "Jazamine in the Green Wood" (*Interzone* 86), though perhaps his best-remembered and best-received stories were "La Macchina" (*IZ* 46) and "The Welfare Man" (*IZ* 74). He lives in Cambridge. Chris adds: "my thanks to the other participants in the Milford 1994 writers' conference for their advice on this story, and for a fun week. They were Chris Amies, Lawrence Dyer, Peter Garratt, Philip Gladwin, Liz Holliday, Ben Jeapes, Jane Killick and Ian Lee."

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Freighting It In

Gregory Benford
interviewed by
Barry Forshaw

Born in 1941, Professor Gregory Benford began his public career as a writer and editor of fanzines in the early 1960s, and has succeeded in building a high reputation both as a scientist and as a science-fiction author. Meeting Benford is rather like reading one of his much-acclaimed novels: his ideas spin at you in dizzying profusion, with science as a positive and a life-affirming inspiration. There are times when you're obliged to draw breath after a headlong rush of references, both arcane and populist; and the experience is highly entertaining – although not to be recommended to those who aren't prepared to exercise their grey matter at something like optimum level.

Benford was in Britain for the Glasgow World SF Convention and various other events to coincide with publication of the latest volume in his stunning "Galactic Centre" sequence, *Sailing Bright Eternity* (for which Gollancz have high hopes). I knew that I wouldn't get by with a hastily compiled catalogue of standard sf-

author questions, for Benford's books have always gleamed with the intelligence of a man whose other role in life is that of a theoretical physicist. This, of course, is why the science in his books always seems so right: Benford points out that if you want your readers to accept a preposterous premise, you do so by couching it in as authentic a guise as possible.

Over a Diet Coke, Benford (who looks too young to have achieved his many career goals) is assessing you with a clinical eye; friendly, chatty, sure – but this, you feel, is not a man who suffers fools gladly. His wife sits in on the inter-

view, attentive but largely silent, accentuating the feeling that an interviewer had better have done his homework.

As one who feels that Benford is probably the finest writer of Hard Science Fiction practising today (with Stephen Baxter as his nearest challenger), I have few fears on that account. But Benford has a genuine modesty that is uncomfortable with such hyperbole. He twice acknowledges a debt to Robert A. Heinlein, and delivers unsolicited encomiums to the skills of Arthur C. Clarke with a PR's enthusiasm. When I dare to suggest that my admiration for Clarke is tempered by his penny-plain writing style, Benford mounts a spirited defence, citing Hemingway as a writer who pared his style to a minimum (although Clarke, one feels, didn't go through a refining process to reach his famous sparseness).

"This is a common criticism that's made of Clarke, and I think it's really unfair – you'd never hear that criticism made of more literary authors. Clarke knows exactly what he wants, and just how to achieve those effects. Look at –" and he struggles for a minute to recall the title – "The Nine Billion Names of God": absolutely perfect in its concision, one of the finest sf short stories ever written."

Benford's generosity here is particularly striking, given his own attempts to introduce the fine writing style of mainstream authors into sf. When I mention the shade of James Joyce behind the poetic similes of his work, he happily throws in other influences.

"Basically, my background is a particular American style of narrative – a storytelling tradition that stretches back to William Faulkner. I do try to raise the standard of writing in the field – and I don't mean to disparage other writers – just to alter people's expectations of what sf writing could or should do. But I try not to use technique that draws attention to itself – the reader shouldn't be distracted from the thrust of the narrative by showy technique. Heinlein was a writer whose style was absolutely perfect for what he set out to achieve. *Starship Troopers*, written from the perspective of a 'grunt' or foot-soldier, is a very canny example of a writer choosing the most apposite voice for a

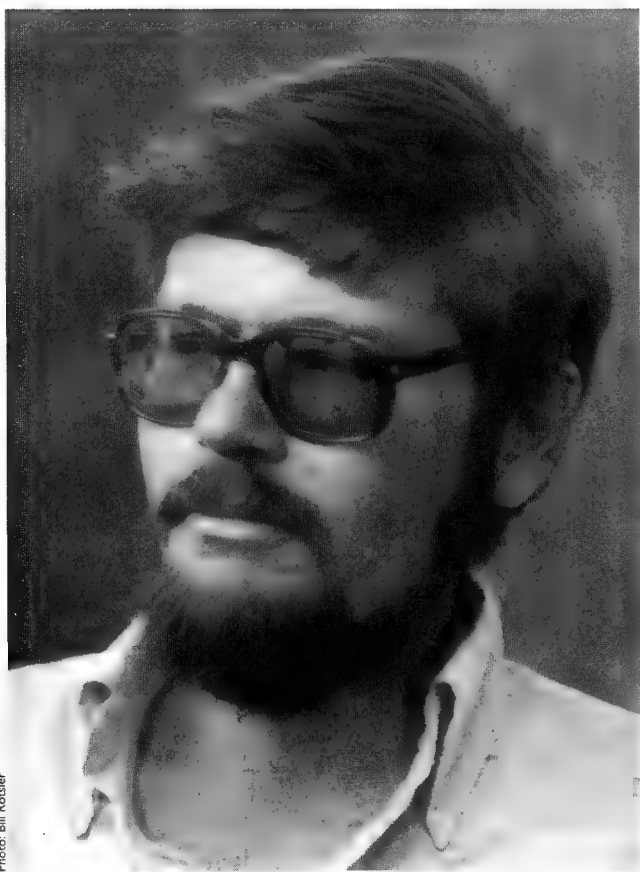


Photo: Bill Rostler

book; and Heinlein never puts a foot wrong, either there or in something like *Stranger in a Strange Land* – although that book is not as fashionable as it used to be.”

This last remark leads to a musing on the 1960s, when sf found itself with a powerful counter-culture appeal, and on how that has waned markedly in the materialistic 80s and 90s.

But, whatever his concern with style, Benford is scarcely an author who writes about the sex lives of literati living in Greenwich Village or Islington. His epic “Galactic Centre” sequence of novels – *In the Ocean of Night* (1977), *Across the Sea of Suns* (1984), *Great Sky River* (1987), *Tides of Light* (1989), *Furious Gulf* (1983) and now *Sailing Bright Eternity* – is a cosmos-spanning saga of immense proportions, and it features some highly original ideas – such as a cosmic hoop that bisects a world, and his protagonist’s vertiginous fall through a vast machine to the molten heart of a planet. Machines are, of course, central to Benford’s writing; and the Galactic sequence depicts the scientifically enhanced survivors of the human race fighting to stave off extinction at the hands of ruthless machines known as the Mechs. I ask if he considers the machine foe or ally.

“Both, of course – but I dislike the knee-jerk fear of technology that’s so prevalent today,” Benford replies. “And I think this comes from an ambivalent relationship we have with the machine. There are few people who would seriously argue that we’d be better off without them, but it’s become a commonplace to issue jeremiads about how we’ll all be rendered obsolete by technical advances – and I suppose that sf must take its share of the blame here. For every H. G. Wells who extols the bright future of the technological age, there are 20 sinister tales of malignant machines – and I write them, too!”

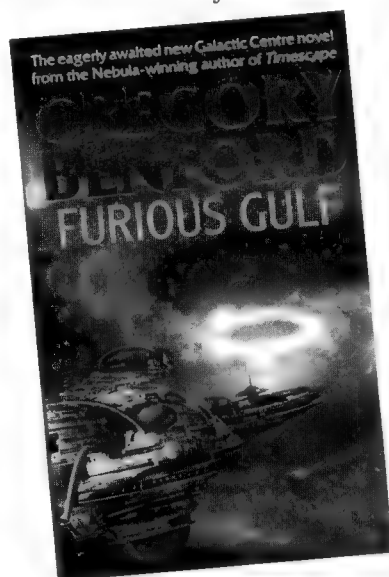
Benford muses about the book itself as an artefact. “After all, you could really say it’s already achieved its ultimate refinement – portable, user-friendly – what more does it need?” When I suggest that future generations won’t have our sentimental attachment to the book as object, Benford argues that the aesthetic pleasure can be transposed into some kind of electronic form: “A screen, perhaps, but packaged as some kind of book-like object. You could even think about bindings – vellum, say, or leather. A synthesis of the old and the new.”

My gloomy suggestion that there’s a generation growing up for whom books have as much relevance as a 78-rpm gramophone is met with Benford’s customary optimism. “I don’t think so. There are kids out there who want to read, and I think there’ll

be a reaction against all the things that stop them reading now. It’s up to us to inspire them.”

Benford points out that his career as a physicist has given him incalculable amounts of background for such books as *Timescape* (1980). He modestly declines to accept my favourable comparison of his book to Wells’s *The Time Machine*. “That’s – how many words?, a novella – but no one will ever write a time-travel novel that can surpass it. I didn’t even try; the approach I took, which avoids the journey through time of a single protagonist, is only one of the many divergences from Wells’s approach. I wanted the science aspect to be more plausible – Wells doesn’t spend too much time expanding on that.”

This seems like a good moment to talk about one of Benford’s supreme strengths as a writer, the sense of absolute authenticity



that takes over whenever scientific concepts appear in one of his novels. Scientists I’ve spoken too – always the most ruthless critics of such elements in sf, which they mostly dismiss as half-baked or ludicrous – beam with pleasure when Benford’s name is mentioned. He gets it right. “So far, editors haven’t asked me to minimize the scientific detail.” This is probably because Benford never slows down the headlong momentum of his narratives to painstakingly fill in such data – “On the hoof” is his description of how he “freights it in.”

“Readers these days are very sharp, and you’ve really got to – as far as possible – get it right. It’s true that my background is a considerable help, but any writer worth his salt can do it: it’s a question of research, and no sf author can afford to be lazy in that area.” I avoid suggesting that quite a few writers might be accused of just that, as it’s become apparent to me that this is a man who harbours very few beefs against his fellow prac-

tioners. Not so publishers, though: while Benford is aware that his British publishers are pushing the boat out for him, a rare flash of negative feeling surfaces at the thought of a former US publisher.

“It really annoys me the way you’re pigeon-holed as an sf author. I tried to carve out for myself a supplementary career as a thriller author, and produced a book under another name. [*Chiller* by Sterling Blake (1993) – Ed.] I thought I could write a scientifically-based thriller that had more plausibility than Michael Crichton – but they didn’t want to know. More Gregory Benford, yes, but the other option just wasn’t being picked up.”

I suggest that most people would regard two highly successful careers as enough for anyone, but Benford assures me that his energy-levels can happily accommodate another outlet, and I get the feeling that the thriller-writing, pseudonymous Benford is just on hold for a little while: this isn’t a man who takes no for an answer.

I mention that I’ve been told by Brian Aldiss (a writer Benford admires: “His story about a returning astronaut existing in a different time-frame to everyone around him – marvellous!”) that producing his “Helliconia” sequence was a “publishing imperative,” and that I sensed that Aldiss wouldn’t otherwise have been disposed to tackle a multiple-novel sequence. Was Benford’s thinking along similar lines with the “Galactic Centre” books? He replies: “You probably know better than I how it works as a sequence – it became a quintet almost by default.” Like *Topsy*, the sequence “just grewed,” and the taut sense of structure is, it seems, instinctive rather than planned: it’s a sign of the remarkable unconscious organizing intelligence of the author that this carefully orchestrated sequence of novels wasn’t really carefully orchestrated at all.

In view of Channel Four Television’s recent science-fiction weekend and its attendant press coverage, all of which subscribed to the freakish perception of the sf fan as a gullible loner and social maladroitness who has difficulties relating to something other than the correct usage of Klingon verbs, I ask Benford how he views his audience.

“Those are pernicious stereotypes. Certainly, it’s true of some,” he concedes, “but those perceptions are manufactured by people who have a fear of the whole constellation of science, technology and the future. And this idea that fans lack social skills, dress-sense, whatever – why should sf readers be singled out like that? Apart from anything else, sf readers represent a very broad church – you’ll find all walks of life, all social backgrounds – if anything, the one thing

they'll have in common is a lively, questioning intelligence."

When he sees that I'm about to refer to a group of sf fans not overburdened with intelligence, he quickly interposes: "Of course there are exceptions – but why should anything be identified by its lowest common denominator? I don't know, maybe I'm sheltered, but my books don't appeal to the reader who wants simple space opera – although I like to think that they function just on the level of a gripping, forward-moving narrative." No arguments there. "Besides, I often find sf fans have a wide range of interests." This last is clearly true of Benford himself – he's a committed theatre buff. He and his wife ask me what are the hottest theatre tickets in London (apart from Andrew Lloyd Webber musicals) – and despite that being the sort of question that always renders the mind a total blank, I suggest Julie Christie in a Pinter revival (and make a note to have a few hot tips next time we meet).

Returning to the image of sf fans, Benford suggests that scientists are held in similarly low esteem, and when I suggest that, in his own country, this might be linked to the rise of the Religious Right (with their forcing of creationism back on school curricula alongside evolution), he defensively suggests that things aren't quite so bad – yet. "I think this is a false dichotomy – science doesn't have to compete with religion, except in issues like the creation of the uni-

verse. I thought this was an issue we resolved in the 19th century." (A surprising statement in light of European perception of the U.S. rush to religious fundamentalism.) "Science is subversive – it's the revolutionary force in modern times. People are frightened by this."

Clearly, the big issues are up for grabs in any conversation with Benford. So I press on – to politics. "You mentioned Heinlein and Wells," I say, "who are perceived as, respectively, right and left of the political spectrum. So where do you see yourself?" Taking me to task for a too-pat description of Heinlein's stance, Benford then leans back in his chair and gives far longer thought to his reply than to anything else I have asked him.

"I'm... in favour of... what works." His usual swift mode of speech has become more languid. "And general liberal, capitalist democracy. I usually vote libertarian, but I'm registered as a Democrat. Politics is like the weather... I'm interested in the climate." My amusement at this one-liner is tempered a little by his subsequent defence of the literary skills of Newt Gingrich (am I being sent up?), and it is in this one area that the transatlantic divide becomes apparent. Can you trade horror stories about Margaret Thatcher for the thoughts of Pat Buchanan? Perhaps best to stick with the universal language of science fiction.

I sense that the natural lifespan of the interview might be drawing to a close – references to Newt Gingrich

do that to me – so I decide to finish with the hijacking of sf by so much fey sub-Tolkien fantasy, and the marginalizing of writers like Benford who don't trade in wizards and whimsy.

"I can live with being out of date," he says, "and if the fashion now is for voluminous fantasies, so be it – but I write for myself. These things are, I think, cyclical." Benford has nothing but praise for Terry Pratchett: "his books are very clever, and function on a lot of levels, and everything is informed by a real affection for his subject. Unlike that other British author – what's his name? The one who just ridicules SF concepts?" I suggest Douglas Adams. "Right! That's the guy!" It seems I've found another of those rarities – an author Benford is cool towards – even if I don't get the expected statement of dislike of fantasy. "But readers are the ultimate arbiters: they know what they want. Today, it may be trolls and wizards, but, thankfully, there are still readers excited by faster-than-light space odysseys, alien civilizations, time travel – these are the basic tenets of classic sf, and as long as writers can ring the changes with sufficient imagination and flair I'm confident they'll find readers."

Fortunately for Benford and his publishers, there are plenty of readers around who know precisely what classic science fiction is all about – and it is certain that Greg Benford is one author who will continue to deliver the goods. ■

at all? For a while, this led to a situation in which editors felt obliged to pay a small amount simply to duck the "fan" controversy.

A good example would be *Dream*, and I'll concentrate on it as its editor, Trevor Jones, has died and cannot reply himself. Of course, I am biased, having had several stories in *Dream*. (The small payments came on time, and were sometimes welcome!) Though fond of a few idiosyncratic writers who haven't resurfaced, Jones also published Steve Baxter, Peter Hamilton, John Gribbin, Keith Brooke, Philip Jennings, Bill King, Neil McIntosh, E. R. James, Linda Markley and other known names, as well as some like Gerry Connelly whom one would like to see more from. Some of these might have given up had the field been left to the few prozines and the fictionless backwater of the fanzines.

Peter T. Garratt
Brighton

Editor: It was the French that invented the small-press fiction zine... No, sorry, only kidding. You're quite right to recall the achievements of Trevor Jones's *Dream* (later New Moon SF).



Interaction

continued from page 5

Dear Editors:

Here are some additions/corrections to the following lists:

"Imaginary People" (IZ 99): Freddy Krueger also appears in *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* (1994; dir. Craven), played again by Robert Englund – who also plays himself.

British magazine list (IZ 100): *Frighteners* actually published three issues, not one, though the latter two had limited distribution after W. H. Smith's and Menzies banned issue one. The editor was (uncredited) Oliver Frey, and the magazine was never up to very much.

Gary Couzens
Aldershot, Hants.

Editor: Thanks for those snippets, Gary, and thanks to everybody else who has written in with corrections or comments on my Imaginary People extracts. Most useful. The book should be appearing from Scolar Press in the summer or autumn of 1996.

Dear Editors:

Congratulations on reaching issue 100. The new logo on the cover and the illustrations for the regular columns are a great improvement. This is certainly the best-looking issue of *Interzone* so far: well done SMS and Paul Brazier. However, I'm not entirely sure that an illustration taken from *Things to Come* is appropriate for a review of last summer's films – perhaps more of a case of "Back to the Future"? The fiction was up to your usual high standard, with two exceptionally good stories in Baxter and Brown's "Sunfly" and McDonald's "Frooks." The latter must be both the funniest and the saddest of the alien-encounter stories which I have read – and, sad to say, probably the closest to the truth.

Malcolm Smith
London

The Tinkerbell Theory

Mary Soon Lee

At first Jeanne ignored all the fussing on the news about Poltergeists and Demons and the End of the World. There was some sort of carrying on like that most every year, and never anything that came of it, as far as she could see.

But the fussing didn't die down, and first Paula in the grocer's shop and then Mr Whittaker outside the library wouldn't stop talking about it. Even her good friend Tom Bredon, who was more than old enough to have grown some sense, brought it up over their regular Sunday lunch together.

He pushed his empty plate away from him, thanked her for the roast dinner, hung his head like a miscreant schoolboy, and said, "Have you been following the news, Jeanne?"

"Same as usual." She knew what Tom was driving at, but she wasn't about to help him. Last time she'd encouraged any of his foolishness, they'd both ended up wet as fish, squelching through Long Meadow in a storm, trying to see if the plants smelled any different in the rain.

Tom fiddled with his fork, the thick gray of his eyebrows furrowed together into one bushy stroke. "I don't believe in poltergeists any more than you do, Jeanne, but something or someone rearranged my books. When I went to the shelves this morning, Virgil was next to a French grammar, and all the Irving books were upside down."

A dozen sharp retorts tingled on the tip of Jeanne's tongue, but despite an occasional walk in the rain, Tom Bredon was mostly a sensible man. He wasn't given to wild nights or drinking bouts, and from the plain tone of his voice, she knew he wasn't teasing her. "Has anyone been over to visit? Your daughter or her children?"

"No guests, and I looked at those books only on Friday night, choosing something to re-read."

"Well then, some books upped and moved. There have

been times when I could have sworn things shifted here: my slippers sidling from one room to another, or a pen tucking itself into a hiding hole. There's no call to get yourself in a fidget." But it wasn't quite the same, and Jeanne knew it even as she cut a slice of vanilla cake and pushed it over to Tom.

"It doesn't stop at books. On October 12th it started snowing in Vero Beach, Florida, and the snow's fallen steadily for the past week, driving away all the sun-seekers. In New York, police report that 60 percent of the homeless population have apparently vanished, leaving their possessions – and in four cases even the clothes they were lying in – on the sidewalk." Tom paused, his hand reaching out as though to touch her wrist, then stopping half an inch short. "I don't like thinking about you on your own out here. Please, come and stay at my house tonight."

Dust motes hung in the air around Tom, suspended in a beam of sunlight. His gaze held her for a moment, his eyes the same clear brown as his brother Robert's had been, but the lines around them gentler, quieter. There was a time when Jeanne would have given part of her soul to have Robert look at her that way. But Tom, Tom had just been Robert's older brother, and Jeanne had paid him less attention than the milk cows in the fields.

"I'm not asking you to share my bed," said Tom. "I know your views on that topic, so I cleaned out the spare room before I came over."

Jeanne squeezed his hand. "Thank you for asking, but I make a terrible visitor. You'd be begging me to leave before an hour was out."

"Jeanne –"

"No, and that's final. Now finish up that cake; I want you to look at my geraniums before you leave, and see if you think it's time to take them indoors for the winter."

Tom said no more on the matter. He and Jeanne

traipsed round the garden after lunch, and then along the footpath to the meadow. The first of the leaves were shading to orange and red and brown. In the weak sunlight the slopes of tall grass turned to gold and green velvet. Moisture clung to the air, rain-scent beckoning. For a fanciful moment, Jeanne thought she could taste Change and Endings coming on the wind, the flavour as real as the ground under her feet. But she didn't choose to mention that to Tom, and they walked back to the house in silence.

On Monday morning, after a sound night's sleep, Jeanne went up the attic to draw. The room was full of her work, pencil and crayon sketches mostly, tilted up against the whitewashed walls and on rickety tables.

Jeanne humphed to herself as she noticed that the dustcover had slipped down from the only orderly pile, the watercolours she sold to supplement her income. She grabbed the dustcover and threw it over them, but not before she counted three pictures of rabbits with overly large, lopsided ears, and one of a cat too fat and self-satisfied to ever hunt for its supper. Manufactured cuteness in pastel tones. Bad enough that she spent hours painting them; she didn't have to look at them all day as well.

She propped a sketchpad on the easel, selected a 2B pencil. Robert had been on her mind since yesterday, so she pencilled in his profile, the firm jut of his chin, the fullness of his lips. Not Robert as she'd last seen him, all muscle turned to fat, and a petulant expression soaked into the curves of his face. *No*, she closed her eyes, *Robert*: two parts arrogance and one part downright handsome. Her fingers twitched, and, eyes still closed, her hand moved across the expanse of the sheet.

Tom would laugh if he saw her now, drawing blind. She shook her head, the pencil still busy in her hand, that was untrue. Tom never laughed about anything connected with Robert. The pencil stopped of its own accord, and she opened her eyes.

A twin-headed monster glared back at her, closer to Cubism than anything she'd tried. Robert sneered at her from the left side, his lips reduced to two parted pink triangles. In the middle his head distorted, reversed into a sombre patchwork of rectangles that matched the planes of Tom's aging face, overlaid by one clear brown eye.

Jeanne stared at the brown eye, at the pink triangular lips. She laid her plain gray 2B pencil on the edge of the easel, ripped the sheet of paper loose, and tore it into smaller and smaller pieces. Only when the bits of paper were too tiny to tear did she finally stop. She collected all the scraps, her fingers shaking, dropped them into the trash, and walked down to the sitting room.

She phoned Tom. No answer. She phoned her sister in Ohio, but a recorded message announced that all phone lines were down in Ohio.

She turned on the television, found a government bulletin on the third channel she tried. Eight elevated highways and 53 bridges had disappeared overnight, the adjoining roads sheared cleanly into nothingness. A moderate-sized mountain had settled

itself in the middle of Kansas; no one knew how many people had been squashed underneath. People were advised to stay at home and listen to their local radio stations.

Jeanne tried Tom's number again – not that she was worrying about him, that would be a fool thing to do, and him a grown man – after 12 rings, she put the phone down. Most probably he'd caught the curiosity bug, and gone to witness some local anomaly.

She made herself a strong coffee, laced it with cream and whisky, and burned her tongue sipping it as she listened to the radio. Not much difference from the television reports, more warnings to stay at home, mixed in with speculation on the causes.

The physicists were divided into two camps. One side talked about how the universe was split into different domains where the "weak" and "electromagnetic" interactions between particles were frozen into different relationships. They hypothesized that a massive structural upheaval had flipped parts of the local region from one domain to another. The other camp said that wouldn't explain the perceived effects, and instead advocated a Tinkerbell Theory, whereby the nature of the universe was held constant by people's consensus agreement on its form. Everyone knew how the universe was meant to behave, and so the universe behaved that way. According to them, a tiny initial aberration could have been magnified by an increasing breakdown of this consensus, leading to a destructive feedback cycle.

Jeanne snorted. The scientists barely made more sense than the Paranormal Experts. The only thing they convinced her of was that they were as confused as everyone else. She switched off the radio, and tried Tom's number again, her fingers drumming on the windowsill. Four rings, five. Outside, something was wrong – the shadows were concave curves, the shade of the roof an upside down arch. Eight rings, nine.

She set the receiver down, collected some toiletries and underwear in a plastic bag, put on her raincoat. The front door squeaked shut behind her almost mournfully, and she stared at the house, trying to fix it in her memory: the cotoneaster growing up and over the side of the porch, the green paintwork. Seemed as though there were no guarantees it would stay the same way.

She drove her car toward Tom's, but halfway there the road surface ended abruptly. Ahead, the remains of the wheat stubble stretched in unbroken ranks from left to right. Jeanne turned the car around and tried a different route, but the closest she could get to Tom's house was a forest about two miles away.

She took her bag out of the car, and walked through the forest at a steady pace. There should have been mobile homes tucked under the trees to either side, toddlers bawling, and a broad gravel driveway. Jeanne kept glancing sideways, but there was nothing to see but a stand of pine trees, the scent of the resin thick in the air, an occasional pinecone crunching under her shoes. She pulled her bag tight against her, and marched on.

Tom's house was still standing, though the road and the Miltons' house had vanished, leaving Tom's

two-storied brick building the only sizable man-made structure in sight. Two surviving telephone poles stood in the middle of a field, wires dangling slackly from the ends.

She rang the doorbell. "Tom?"

"Jeanne. Let yourself in," said Tom, and he sounded odd, out of breath. "I'm trapped, and more than glad you're here."

"Trapped? How?" Her voice was sharper than she'd intended, but all she heard from indoors was a grunt. She got out the key for Tom's and unlocked the door, but it wouldn't open. "Tom?!"

She threw herself bodily against the door. The wood inched inward. She pushed again, squeezed through the gap.

Plasterboard and dust and broken furniture were strewn across the ground. Looking up, she saw the rough marks above her head where the top floor used to meet the walls, and above that the bedroom ceilings, perfectly intact. "Tom!"

"In here."

She ploughed through the debris toward his voice, dust rising around her feet in clouds. Tom's head and his left arm poked out of a heap of plasterboard and the bright white enamel remains of a sink. He waved at her with his free arm. His face was several shades paler than usual, and his body doubtless worse, crushed under that weight. And dwelling on might-bes would help neither of them.

"What have you done to yourself this time, Thomas Michael Bredon?" She scrabbled in the debris, pulling the rubble clear from him.

"I was in the bathroom early this morning when the floor collapsed – watch where you put your hand! I was undressed at the time."

"So I feel," said Jeanne, and Tom's cheeks reddened. She levered away a plank, and stopped still. Beneath a sticky mess of dust and brown drying blood, she could see Tom's right leg. A dark swollen bruise stood out on his thigh, his knee rotated to an impossible angle. Below, the skin jutted out, perforated by the gray of bone. It hurt to see, hurt maybe more than she'd expected anything to hurt again. And no one nearby, the phone lines down, no guarantee the hospitals even still existed.

Without realizing it, her own legs had folded under her, and she was on her knees beside Tom.

"It's all right," said Tom, and that was wrong, too. She was the one meant to be reassuring. "It's all right. Thank you for coming – all the time I lay here, I knew you would come."

That was what the physicist had said on the radio, about people all knowing or believing what the universe would be like, and so it was. The Tinkerbell Theory. Jeanne stared at Tom's leg, trying to imagine it was healed and straight. But she wasn't a child able to believe in fairies: broken was broken, and often past mending.

Tom's eyes closed and something in Jeanne crumbled, bit by bit, until she knew she was nothing but a useless old woman. She laid her hand on Tom's warm shoulder, "Hush now."

She shut her eyes. And for a minute, because it

couldn't make anything worse, she tried to believe that Tom was well. She pictured him walking through Long Meadow beside her, the easy lope of his stride, his face and hands brown from the summer. "Please," whispered Jeanne.

Tom stirred beneath her hand, pushed himself upright.

Jeanne blinked. "Oh," she said, and nothing else came out but a second, "Oh." For there sat Tom, his legs uninjured, even the layer of dust gone.

He smiled at her, a good smile, solid to the core. "That's one I owe you, Jeanne. Now if you could find me some clothes somewhere, I'd be doubly grateful."

"Don't be expecting me to do everything for you or you'll have a long wait," said Jeanne. There was a lot more she might have said, and most of it gentler, but Tom Bredon knew her well enough not to need it said out loud.

He stood up. "What's happening outside?"

Jeanne shrugged. "I'm not sure. Maybe the tabloids were right for once, and it is the end of the world. Half the roads are gone, and all the houses near you."

She followed him across the mess, and out the front door. The sun hung too low in the sky, and all about it the stars stood out, scarlet and amethyst and gold specks, brighter than day. Their twin shadows stretched to the side, distorted into intricate curves that twisted in the grass. Tom held out his left hand, palm up, and cupped the fingers together. A deep thrumming started out of nowhere, resonant and sweet.

Tom's fingers flexed, and the sound of distant flutes trembled in the air.

He let his hand fall, and stared at Jeanne in the sudden silence. "Give me a promise, and give it true," he said, and his voice lost the smoothness from his college days. "Jeanne, say you'll stay with me, no matter what."

"You won't thank yourself if I agree. I'm a cantankerous old woman, and change what might, I'm sorry but I still don't lust after you, probably never will." She pulled herself straighter, trying not to think about Robert, and the old sore hurt he'd left behind when he upped and walked out of her house, 14 years ago. "We'd be merely good friends, Tom."

"That's enough," he said, easing himself onto the grass. He cupped his hand, and the music welled up. Jeanne sat down beside him, and for a moment she wondered about the other people, about the changes, and whether things would ever come right again. And then the notion slipped sideways in her mind, and there was only the music, and the stars brightening in the day sky, and the voice of a friend, warm as wool around her.

Mary Soon Lee has appeared in *Interzone* just once before, with "Assembly Line" (issue 98). British born and raised, she sports an MSc in astronautics and space engineering, and now works in computing research in Pittsburgh, PA.

As I write, it's one month since the Gigantic World SF Convention in Glasgow, which seems to have hurled the whole British sf scene into shell-shocked paralysis. But amid agonized cries of "Never again! Let the Americans do all the Worldcons," there emerged a faint, infinitely sinister whisper of: "Cardiff in 2003, anyone?"

THE WOODS DECAY, THE WOODS DECAY AND FALL

Steve Brown, editor of the US critical magazine *SF Eye*, tells me not to be awed by its fabled literary standards: "I have been trying for some time to lower those standards. I want *SFE* to be the people's mag, where they can sit back on the sofa, grunt, scratch their hairy chest through a dirty T-shirt, pop the top from a cheap can of beer and begin to read." But isn't that the niche of *Interzone*?

John Brunner's secular funeral was held at Taunton Deane Crematorium on 6 September, with perhaps 50 in attendance. Following strange Chinese music, John's widow LiYi Tan Brunner and others – including Christopher Priest – shared memories of him. Terry Pratchett was also present. LiYi asked that tributes take the form of a donation to Friends of Foundation (which helps support the British SF Foundation), c/o 75 Rosslyn Avenue, Harold Wood, Essex, RM3 0RG, marked as a "John Brunner Memorial" contribution; she hopes for a memorial exhibit as part of the SF Foundation Library. Before the funeral I re-read *The Shockwave Rider* and *Traveller in Black...* a rewarding way to remember John. Goodbye.

Roald Dahl remains controversial though dead: this summer saw yet another abortive attempt to ban his books from a US elementary school syllabus (this time in Virginia), for "glorifying dangerous and disrespectful behaviour in children".

Michael Ende, best known outside his native Germany for *The Neverending Story* (whose movie version he despised as plastic kitsch), died aged 65 on 28 August.

Greg Egan won the John W. Campbell Memorial Award (the other JWC award, not the "new writer" one presented with the Hugos) for his spiffy sf novel *Permutation City*.

Bob Shaw was crushed by the insight of a fan who accosted him after one of his celebrated humorous talks: "I listened to you carefully and realized that most of the things you said were not funny; you only made people think they were funny." (Thus *Critical Wave* #42.) The cunning, double-crossing fiend!

Ian Watson's tie-in novels based on the Games Workshop *Warhammer 40,000* game have overwhelmingly outsold all other GW spinoff books. Constant readers will recall that GW's reaction to this terrifying success was to strictly limit (or ban) the presence of the Watson books in their own shops, for fear that the pimply audience might buy them instead of games. But even this was not enough, and top-seller Watson has effectively been sacked: henceforth all GW spinoff authors will be closely vetted for signs of dangerous saleability or literary merit. The extent to which the books' actual publishers (Boxtree) are delighted by this new development remains uncertain.

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

Savoy Books remain enmeshed in legal toils: in July, after a five-day hearing in Manchester, stipendiary magistrate Janet Hayward rejected all defence arguments and decided that 4,000 police-seized Savoy comics (copies of *Lord Horror* 1-2, *Hard Core Horror* 1-5 and *Meng & Ecker* 1-3) were (a) obscene, and (b) lacked any literary or artistic merit that might support a "public good" defence. The Savoy chaps continue to stress the "anti-Nazi" thrust of the comics, and are also grumpy about "the Solicitor General's assurance that these sort of summary proceedings would not be instituted if publishers expressed a preference for trial by jury" – which Savoy duly did, only to be refused. An appeal was planned.

Harlanwatch. Malcolm Edwards of HarperCollins gleefully sent a *Publishers Weekly* ad explaining that Harlan Ellison's new collection *Slippage*, scheduled for August 1995, is delayed for an unknown period while New Stuff is added.... "Tee hee," quoth Malcolm. "Did he know that 'slippage' is the term we use for books which have to be postponed? Can it be a hoax?" Meanwhile *George Alec Effinger* remarked at the US National SF convention's opening ceremony that this was the 25th anniversary of his first ever sale ... and, persistently heckled by a co-guest, threatened: "Harlan, if you don't shut up, I'm going to tell everyone what that first sale was to!" Collapse into silence of *Last Dangerous Visions* editor....

SF Prophecies. Apt name for a fiendish villain in a context of communications media: Murdoch. (George O. Smith, *Venus Equilateral*, 1947.)

Sturgeon Award: this is given for the year's best short story, and went to Ursula Le Guin's "Forgiveness Day" (*Asimov's*, November 1994).

ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

Spot the Ball. "Who in this world... would write a novel about a football team that falls victim to a group of wily elves?" asks a US HarperPrism ad. Who indeed? A small prize is offered to the first fan to locate a football team in the book concerned, Terry Pratchett's *Lords and Ladies*.

Ten Years Ago: J.G. Ballard caused fans to worry that the J might stand for Jerry after all: "I want more nuclear weapons... I want my own cruise missile at the bottom of my garden."

Galaxy magazine, after eight issues of revival as a US small-press publication, is going all-electronic and will be available only on disk or CD-ROM – or via Internet.

The Future of Death. Have you heard of the "Darwin Awards," given posthumously to people who improve the human gene pool by killing themselves in memorably cretinous ways? A strong contender this year was deduced by the US Arizona Highway Patrol from a mass of smouldering metal embedded in a roadside cliff – looking like a plane crash but proving to be the remains of a Chevy Impala. Lab reconstruction: the late driver was a speed enthusiast who had enhanced his car with a solid-fuel JATO rocket (as used in heavy military transport planes to boost takeoff on short runways), found a nice long straight stretch of road, got up to speed, fired the JATO... and subsequently, with the brakes burned out of existence by failed efforts to slow down, encountered a slight curve at 250-300mph. Gulp.

SF Masterclass. "The flame's hand flattened the road flat." (K. W. Jeter, *Blade Runner 2*) "His chuckle seemed to come from below his belt." (Nancy Price, *Night Woman*, 1992)



Save for one thing we'll come to in a moment, *Species* is so inept it's a miracle it grew up to a film at all, let alone a successful breeder of sequel. A neatly preposterous, even modestly original, sf premise (alien species propagating by beaming viral genetic information across the cosmos for mugs with SETI programmes and DNA-sequencing technology to splice ill-advisedly into their own code, creating instant psychopathic alien drop-dead superbabe) is let loose to burn up like a discarded booster the moment the plot is in a stable orbit, and any remaining pretensions to speculative wit are stranded as meretricious one-liners. ("She'd make an excellent biological weapon, if someone out there thought we were some sort of galactic weed that had to be eliminated." Or: "She was half us, half something else – I wonder which was the predatory

half?"). An, erm, "ensemble" cast of diligently professional faces under Roger Donaldson's no less professional direction is left to do the best it can with a patchwork of pilfers from other movies and a shambolic script that seems to have been rewritten so many times as to have cut all the bits that once made sense.

And yet there is one magical feature of *Species* that at a stroke makes all this irrelevant. The spliced-in seed of alien genius from way, way out there that mutates an unskilled juvenile with all looks and no personality into an unstoppable all-consuming monster turns out to be, of all things, the deceptively-pointless Forest Whitaker character. Leaving aside the heroic investment of coarse acting the ever-industrious Whitaker puts into a role almost as underwritten as all the others in the movie, the concept embodied in his character is one

of the most brilliantly simple inspirations in the history of film plotting: one that could liberate us forever from the shackles of plodding Aristotelian cause and effect. "I'm an empath," his character explains at Ben Kingsley's casting party where "the team" introduce themselves. *I'm a last-ditch plot device to make reason and motivation dispensable.* "I feel things strongly." *I read subtext, guess the next scene, fill in the inner lives of characters who haven't been properly fleshed out, and above all throw sparks of intuition unerringly across gaps in the logic.* And suddenly nothing needs to make any kind of sense ever again, because Dan the empath is permanently on call to patch the holes, read the minds that script alone cannot penetrate, and vault dizzying chasms of *non sequitur* to land precisely at the right conclusions. Lost the plot? Dan can pick it up from cold. And once you get used to it, you don't even need Dan around to do it! A little practice, and you can see movement in the spaces between the lines where the untrained eye sees only vacuity.

Let's have a go, shall we? Warm up with the credits: "Starring, in Alphabetical Order..." *This is a no-star movie where we spent all the money on Giger and had to take what we could afford. "... Ben Kingsley..." Great, Ben, but can you do it again being more hawklike? No, more than that. No, no, more than that, even. Really, it'll look great, trust me. And don't worry about the accent, you have my solemn promise we won't loop you with someone else's voice entirely. "... Michael Madsen ..." We haven't got room for character, so we're casting for attitude. "... Alfred Molina ..." We need an English one to disembowel first. "... and introducing Natasha Henstridge." It can't lose. It's the perfect part for a model with no training, experience or talent: a role with no personality, no history, nothing to do but catwalk about with her peaches showing while she Frenches guys gorily to death.*

Jolly good! Let's ready up for a proper read-through. "We made her a female so she'd be more docile and easier to control." *We made her a girly so she'd be more cinematic and pull in the zitcream crowd. See alien babe lose her top, show off her butt to camera, attempt to figure out how to use a bra! "She wants to have a baby." And the great thing is, she's like wandering round LA totally gagging for it, and they have to get to her before she can find some horny bastard to give her one. Didn't I say this was a bargain at 30 million? "I don't know why I'm here, who I am, who sent me..." Oh dear... I know I seem a bit wooden, but just because my character has the body of an angel and the personality*



of a stickleback doesn't mean it's not a serious acting debut. "When a predatory species is introduced into a closed environment, the extinction of the weaker species is inevitable." *From time to time we're going to drop in portentous lines about evolutionary ethics to hoick our pretensions up from video premiere.* "I know it's been hellish, but I've really enjoyed working with you guys." *I know there hasn't been any chemistry at all between us characters, and of the five alleged specialists who are in every scene two serve no function whatever other than to give alien superbabe someone to slaughter in the imminent final act, while a third is only there to get off with Mr Blonde in the most unerotic, unconvincing, unattractive sexual pairing since Kirk Douglas and Farrah Fawcett in Saturn 3. But do hang on in there, because there's a*

Natascha Henstridge as the "instant psychopathic alien drop-dead superbabe" Sil in *Species* — before (facing page), during (below) and after (overleaf), her attempts to reproduce. Above, Michelle Williams plays the young Sil.



hilarifying bit of repartee coming up about iced tea that the writer/producer has insisted on keeping in despite nobody else's finding it the least funny. Small wonder our heroes go to such lengthy trouble to salvage Whitaker's character from the final conflagration. This man's uncanny talent could be the salvation of motion pictures.

Professionalism is certainly the message, content, and aesthetic of *Apollo 13*, in which viewers too young to remember the space age are treated to a revisionist narrative of NASA's third-biggest embarrassment that deftly sanitizes the Agency of all political and historical context, and replays the failure-is-success, losers-are-winners message of last year's Hanks/Sinise queasifest without any of its irony, darkness, or acknowledgment of history. "This could well be the worst disaster NASA's ever experienced!" bleats Ed Harris's boss. "With due respect, sir," the best supporting actor shoe-in replies, "I think this could be our finest hour."

And the scary thing is, he's right. You can't come out of *Apollo 13* without appreciating that the rescue, even in this discreetly tidied and heroized form, was — by NASA's own terms, which are the only ones admitted here — a stunning technical effort that made the Eagle's landing seem a finger exercise; or without feeling that the only thing that prevents us from recognizing the Apollo programme as the zenith of human endeavour, and its cancellation as the most pitiable failure of vision and spirit in history, is our persistent wishy-washy servitude to economic

MUTANT POPCORN



Nick Lowe

and political realities. "I look at the moon and wonder," says Jim Lovell's closing voiceover: "when will we be going back? and who will that be?" Note that "when," and the use of future indicative in question two, both of which play interestingly off the unusual decision to close with the words "The End."

Without doubt, it's well made. It's refreshing to have a film that doesn't mind throwing technicalities at you faster than you can catch them, simply trusting its audience to be smart enough to keep track, while the necessary exposition is got across with a masterly inventory of expository devices: the scene where the astronaut explains interplanetary ballistics to the seven-year-old using only household toys; the primetime tour of the module live from space; Harris's hardworked plot-diagram blackboard and convenient wallchart cutaways on the pinboard; homespun demos with everyday objects, helpful specifics ("How much power do we have to play with?" "Barely enough to run this coffeepot for nine hours!", &c.), and as much concretization as cinematic ingenuity will allow ("We have to find a way of fitting *this* into the hole made for *this* using only *this*"). It could do with more laughs, and the tautness of writing and construction slackens notably in the last half-hour; but for the most part the knowledge that it all turns out happily is deftly manipulated by suspenseful play with our vagueness over when and where things went right or wrong. (It was instructive, for

example, to find how much of what I thought I remembered about the original mission was actually part of the movie *Marooned*.)

But it's just not possible for audiences as far from innocence as we've become to read either the movie or its subject as a merely technical achievement, let alone the kind of simplistic national cranial massage it's become both on and off Capitol Hill. An uneasy film for non-Americans to colude in, *Apollo 13* deftly uncouples the moon programme from anything resembling real history, relocating it instead in a warm, woolly pop nostalgia for lost Zeitgeist that sees more connection between the end of Apollo and the breakup of the Beatles than with (say) Vietnam or Republican Party politics. "It's not a miracle," says Lovell of the moon landings, overingenuously even by his standards; "we just decided to go." (Exactly who is "we" in this sentence? Does it include, for instance, you? me? James Lovell? the American people?) Often brilliantly-executed, with great support playing (surely no one in the annals of thespianship can rival Kathleen Quinlan as the Queen of Worried) and the kind of polished dialogue and timing you can't help but admire for its sheer craftsmanship, *Apollo 13* is itself an artful celebration of precisely the qualities it wants to ideologize: professionalism,



teamwork, the heroism of common purpose, all the things that make film-making itself (as it serenely permits to be inferred) the natural outlet for today's American heroes. "Perhaps never in human history," intones a rather stretching-it Cronkite v/o, "has the entire world been united by such a global drama." Hurrah! What are we waiting for? Let's reinstate those vision-impaired budget cuts, and

bring harmony to the planet with lots more of NASA's finest hours. For patrons' convenience, a petition to your Congressman is available as you leave this theatre. For your own comfort, please sign before stepping out into the cold, moonless dark outside.

Nick Lowe

1993 and 1994 Hugo Award Winner!

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DARKNESS

Stephen Baxter

Philmus fell out of the light.

She staggered as she dropped into her new body; it was small, compact, with a lower centre of gravity than her own. Hillegas's Virtual scenario flooded over her, a penetrative assault of vision, sounds and smells.

A room: large, gloomy, giving onto a veranda. It was day, but so dark that candles burned on the mantel. A log fire made the room hot, the air heavy. Through the open French window she could see terraced gardens, sweeping down to a lake. Vine leaves crowded around the window frame; but the leaves were small and yellow, under-nourished, and the sky outside was piled thick with brooding clouds.

At a desk before the window sat a man. Sheets of paper on the desk-top were covered with fine, ink-blotched handwriting, heavily revised. There was other furniture in the room: a couch, a heavy armchair, bookcases, small tables. There was an overpowering scent of dirt – musk – barely overlaid by perfumes; the people of this age had had odd notions of hygiene, she remembered.

Philmus held up her hands: they were delicate, the palms free of calluses, and there was a silk ruff around her wrists. The hands were those of a 20-year-old; she'd lost about 30 years in age, she estimated. Her dress, blue, was heavy around her legs – it consisted of layers of stiff, useless material – and something dug into her waist, maybe a corset. Her hair was pulled back into what might be a bun, so tight it hurt.

Another man stood beside her. Was this Hillegas? Tall, young, thinning blond hair, a rather blank expression. His suit was of some rough, dark material; his boots were polished and dark against the carpet.

"Christ," she said. "I hate this part. The arrival." Her voice, she found, was high-pitched.

To her surprise, the man at the desk seemed to react. He turned and ran his hands through a mop of hair – red, shot with grey. "Polidori?" He peered at her – no, *through* her, she realized. He looked perhaps 30. He wore a shirt open at the neck, what looked like jodhpurs, and boots like Hillegas's.

Hillegas ignored him. "We're in the Villa Diodati," he murmured to Philmus. "By the shore of Lac Léman – Lake Geneva. It's 1816. July."

"July? But it's so dark. It's more like winter."

The man at the desk stood and stepped towards them. "Is that you, Polidori?" His accent was clipped – not like modern British – almost Germanic, Philmus thought. His face was strong, compelling, but pale and dark-eyed, she saw, and there was a layer of unattractive fat over his belly and ribs. He had a limp; one of his shoes was built up. "I hear you speak – I see you, but indistinctly – are you spectres? Oh! damn this weather – for a bit of sunlight..."

The man was only three feet from Philmus. "Can he see us?"

"No," Hillegas said.

"Are you sure? Maybe there's some leakage –"

Hillegas walked indifferently around the red-haired man and crossed to the desk. Philmus followed uneasily, oddly embarrassed, avoiding the man's questing eyes.

Hillegas pointed to one of the sheets on the desk. "The brows of men by the despairing light/ Wore an unearthly aspect, as by fits/ The flashes fell upon them..." He turned to her, evidently excited. "This is it! The manuscript of *Darkness*..."

The red-haired man turned and strode back to the desk. "Damn you," he shouted. He picked up a page of his manuscript, crumpled it dramatically and hurled it towards the window. The paper disappeared as soon as it passed through the window-frame, out of the man's sight; it was clumsy, and Philmus's doubts about the quality of Hillegas's simulation deepened. The man cried, "I cannot write! – not the simplest letter. It is as if you have scooped out half my brain, and all of my heart! Why do you spectres not simply kill me?" He opened a drawer in the desk, angrily searching for something.

"Something's wrong," Philmus said, watching him. "Definitely. He is aware of us, and he's conscious of a change in his internal condition. He knows he's not the man of his memories."

Hillegas stared at the man with a kind of greed. "But the simulation's worked. Don't you see? He's in

the middle of composing *Darkness*. I'll be able to ask him – But I need more processing power. Especially if I'm going to achieve a definitive reconstruction of the poem's composition."

"I don't think you're listening to me," she said. She felt tired, and her Virtual body, in its restricting, heavy clothes, was irritating her. "This isn't a question of authenticity, Hillegas. If you've allowed this projection to become fully self-aware, you've broken the sentience laws."

Hillegas's face showed an echo of anger. The face was odd, inhuman, not a full reflection of his mind; it was as if the small muscles around his mouth, governing expression, had been cut. Hillegas's body, like much of the rest of the simulation, was imperfectly visualized; he'd obviously devoted most of the mips available to him to the core of his Virtual, the man at the desk.

Then Hillegas's lips moved – he was sub-vocing, she realized belatedly.

"Hillegas. Don't try anything –"

Hillegas's body seemed to shimmer, and it became more solid, subtly; she was aware of his stronger presence, there in the room with her, as if his gravity field had been increased. She felt wraith-like, insubstantial by comparison.

The red-haired man stared at Hillegas, his full lips parting in shock. To him, Philmus realized, a shadow had just congealed into flesh and blood.

Events moved rapidly, then, out of her control.

Hillegas stepped forward, his hands spread wide. "Lord Byron. I –"

The other man took something from the desk drawer. It was a pistol. He fired it, directly into Hillegas's chest.

It was more an explosion than a shot. Byron's arm was hurled backwards by the recoil. The ball, hard and massive, ripped through Hillegas's torso, and embedded itself in the wall beyond. There was a sharp stink of cordite.

Hillegas looked down, startled, at the hole in his chest. Pixels fluttered about him, blocks of colour in the air.

Philmus sub-voced herself up to Hillegas's density. Byron saw her materialize, and saliva streaked at the corner of his mouth. He dropped the pistol on the desk, and rubbed his firing arm.

Philmus stepped forward. "Congratulations, Hillegas. Now you've really blown it."

Hillegas's face sketched confusion and fear. The pixels clustered like blood platelets over a wound; she could see his shirt and jacket reforming.

"Are you ghosts?" Byron was whispering. "But I do not credit ghosts; for I cannot accept the existence of spirits without a belief in God... What are you, then?"

"Sit down," Philmus said.

His eyes were dark and savage. "Young woman –"

"Sit," she said heavily, "down."

He sat, still massaging his bruised arm.

Hillegas turned to her. "Philmus –"

"Onto the veranda," she ordered. "You –" she stabbed a finger at Byron – "wait there. Don't do a damn thing."

After the room's stuffy interior, the cold outside soon penetrated. She wrapped her arms around her, grateful for the thickness of her clothes. It may have been July, but the temperature was no higher than ten or 15 degrees.

Lac Léman was a steel mirror, reflecting mountains. She saw a sail-boat toiling across the lake surface, ship-waves arcing from its bow across the dead water. There was little sign of habitation: more villas perched on hill-sides, huts speckling the lake shore. Threads of smoke rose up from many of the buildings. She wondered how far this Villa Diodati was from Geneva.

She lifted her face to the sky. The dome of cloud, thick and uniform, cast a grey pall even over the gaunt shoulders of the Alps, on the lake's far shore. There were puddles on the veranda, and in the terraced garden beyond, as if it had been raining recently, and frequently.

But they were close to the edge of the projection, here, and the scene had a lack of substance which enabled her to make out, dimly and occasionally, another vista underlying the surface of things. It was like glimpsing a landscape in the quivering surface of a soap bubble.

Across/within Lac Léman, the campus of Stanford University stretched away, the trees' enviroshields glimmering. Further off, through the misty images of mountains, she made out an immense sphere hulking over the horizon: that was the Palo Alto Snowball, millions of tons of carbon dioxide frozen out of the air and lagged with fibreglass insulator.

And in the sky, just visible as a sketch through cracks in the cloud image, she could make out a Wong Curtain. The sheets of zinc and aluminium wire, suspended 25 miles above the ground, were busily charging ozone-busting chlorofluorocarbon pollutants to harmlessness. Superposed over the clouds of 1816 Switzerland, the Curtain was a bizarre, angular sight, like a huge starship falling into the atmosphere. *Except that starships don't exist.* Not yet, anyway.

She shivered again. "Your simulation is shoddy, Hillegas. And why is it so damn cold?"

"This is 1816," Hillegas said. "The 'year without a summer'."

"What happened?"

"The eruption of Tambora, in the East Indies, last year – I mean, in 1815," he said. "The greatest volcanic explosion in centuries. Cubic miles of dust injected into the atmosphere; cold and gloomy weather all around the world. Harvests failed all over Europe and Asia; in America the migration to the Midwest was accelerated by –"

"It's damn depressing."

"Yes. It didn't do much for his peace of mind."

"Whose?"

"Byron's. He'd just been forced out of England in disgrace. He'd fathered a child by his half-sister, and another in a loveless marriage, where he'd behaved brutally. His friends shunned him. He was drinking too much brandy, and taking laudanum. In a letter to his friend John Hobhouse –"

"I don't care," Philmus said wearily. "I'm just a cop, remember? Jesus, Hillegas. Have you got *any* idea how much trouble you're in?"

"But the project –"

"Let me spell it out, college boy. You've got the processing balance wrong. Byron is too deep; the rest of your simulation too shallow." She waved a hand at the cracked sky. "Look at that. No wonder Byron became suspicious. You've created a self-aware life form, which has strong suspicions of its true nature. And that's against the law."

"I needed more mips. I told Professor Laussel. And Laussel said he'd back me up, over the Byron projection."

"Well, when it came to the crunch, he didn't, Hillegas. In fact it was Laussel who called me in." *And maybe you're dumber than you look.* For the first time she felt a twinge of sympathy for Hillegas; he *was* only a student, and he did seem to have been abandoned by the University authorities. Perhaps he'd been set up, in fact; she wondered how many of his seniors had been intrigued enough by this project to authorize it discreetly, letting this boy take the risks for them. And the rap. But she suppressed the thought; alone or not, Hillegas had known what he was doing when he got into this.

Hillegas stalked to the edge of the veranda. "You don't even know what I'm trying to achieve here. Do you? It's that poem. *Darkness*. What it meant to Byron – and what it means for us. I –"

"Tell it to the judge," she said bluntly. "My responsibility, now, is to the thing you've made in there."

There was a submerged determination in the numbed layers of his face. "You could authorize more mips. Couldn't you? Right here and now."

"Only for the benefit of the sentient," she snapped. "Not for your research."

He smirked. "But maybe the sentient will be interested by my project. *Intrigued*. What then, cop? What will the 'benefit of the sentient' mean then?"

"Hillegas –"

"Why don't you ask him? You have to talk to him anyway. Why don't you ask Byron?"

George Gordon, the sixth Lord Byron, was still sitting at his desk – just as she'd ordered – moodily toying with his pen. The pistol, its muzzle blackened, lay on the desk-top.

His eyes shone, cat-like, as he watched Philmus and Hillegas return to the room.

Philmus stood before Byron and prepared to read him his rights. "Lord Byron –"

He looked at her acutely. "Is that my name?"

I hate this part too, she thought. *I hate the whole damn job, in fact.* "I'm a police officer. Do you understand? I work for an executive administration concerned with the preservation and enforcement of public order –"

"Are you from Geneva?"

"No." *No, from much further than that.* "I'm an American. And this is not Switzerland."

"Then where?"

"California. The west coast of America. I have to

tell you that what you see here –" she waved a hand – isn't real. It's a sort of picture – an illusion."

She couldn't tell if he understood her. "And I? Am I real, madam American? Are you?"

Her upper chest felt constricted. *There's no gentle way to say it.* "I'm real," she said. "And so's Hillegas – this man, here. Although we don't look like this; these aren't our bodies. But you are –"

She stopped. He searched her face, haunted.

"A sort of automaton," Hillegas said.

"Sir," Philmus said to Byron, "two centuries have passed since 1816. We are in the future – your future."

Byron stared at Lac Léman, beyond the window; a muscle twitched in his cheek. His face, its handsome lines masked by puffiness, was like a pool, with currents of speculation and emotion criss-crossing within its depths; this *was* an impressive projection, she conceded.

"I think I knew," he said at length.

"You understand?" she asked, surprised. "You accept what I say?"

"I was aware of something wrong. Certain discontinuities in the warp and weft of things." He touched his scalp gingerly. "And *here*, I find a place of echoes, a half-empty house from whence the people have fled."

"I'm sorry," Hillegas said. "If I'd had more mips, I –"

"Shut up, Hillegas. Look, sir, you have been projected illegally. We have laws against the creation of consciousness for frivolous or immoral purposes; that's why I was called in, to inspect this simulation. But now that you *do* exist, you have rights, under our Constitution." She spoke rapidly. "You have the right to continued existence for an indefinite period in information space, if you wish it. You have the right to read-only interfaces with the prime world... I'll explain all these terms. You have the right to specify the Virtual environment which –"

Hillegas grabbed her arm. "Let me talk to him."

"Haven't you done enough, damn it?"

Hillegas's eyes seemed to glitter. "He's fully accepted the reality of what you've told him. He doesn't have need of your counselling."

"And I don't need you to tell me my job."

Byron rose from his chair with a languid grandeur; his mood seemed to be changing, blackening. "Your clap-trap bores me. Why have you people summoned me from Hell?"

Philmus found herself quailing before his sudden anger; there was something elemental about it, as if it arose from some fundamental fracture within him.

"*Let me answer his question,*" Hillegas said. "He has the right to know."

Byron stepped forward, almost coming between them, and Philmus's head was filled with his powerful, stale stink. "Talk to *me* – not to each other – now that you have troubled to conjure my bones from their grave!"

Philmus felt dizzy, distracted by the tightness and weight of her clothes, the oppressiveness of the day, Byron's powerful presence. "All right," she said weakly. She moved away from them towards the win-

dow, trying to get some air. Through a new crack in the sky, she saw a brief flare of light: probably a Nanosoft killersat taking out a rival, somewhere above the poisonous atmosphere.

"Lord Byron," Hillegas said hesitantly, "I am a student. And I'm fascinated by your poem –"

"Which poem?" Byron snapped with arrogance.

"Darkness. This one." Hillegas picked up a page from the desk-top. "Morn came and went – and came, and brought no day/ And men forgot their passions in the dread/ Of this their desolation..."

"It is new," Byron grumbled. He paced about the desk, and then he sat down, his boots reflecting the candlelight. "It is unfinished."

"In my day," Hillegas said, half-smiling, "it remains famous. After two centuries. It has intrigued generations. As has much of your work."

Byron looked pleased, Philmus thought, though he tried to hide it with a scowl. She felt a prickle of scorn. *After all the shocks he's suffered – even the agony of his recreation as a homonculus – he's retained his vanity. God, I always hated poetry.*

"And it is for this work –" Byron flicked the papers on his desk – "this scribble, that you have roused me from my long sleep?"

"It's important," Hillegas said, and there was an edge in his voice now – an intensity – that made Philmus turn away from Byron to study Hillegas.

"We have to know what you meant by the poem," Hillegas said. "Here." He scrabbled on the desk, and picked out another manuscript page. "The poem opens: 'I had a dream, which was not all a dream...'"

"And so it was," Byron said lazily. "A dream. Or a hypnoid fantasy, perhaps..."

"The bright sun was extinguish'd, and the stars/ Did wander darkling in the eternal space,/ Rayless, and pathless, and the icy earth/ Swung blind and blackening in the moonless air..." Hillegas dropped the page. "I have to know what you meant," he said urgently.

Philmus felt suspicious. This did *not* sound like a run-of-the-mill literary research topic; something deeper was going on here, something she didn't understand yet. She crossed to the desk. "Show me this damn poem."

Hillegas picked up the manuscript pages, muttering to himself, and assembled them in order; evidently he knew the poem almost by heart.

She tried to scan the poem quickly, but Byron's handwriting was too impenetrable, the layers of corrections obscuring; and she had to go back to the start.

The poem's narrator described his "dream" of an earth plunged into darkness. "Morn came and went – and came, and brought no day..." Cities and forests were burned for light and heat, but the fires faded. Men despaired, and the ecology evidently collapsed. "The wild birds shriek'd,/ And, terrified, did flutter on the ground,/ And flap their useless wings..."

Wars were fought over the last food-stocks. Finally, "The world was void.../ Seasonless, herbless, treeless, manless, lifeless.../ The winds were wither'd in the stagnant air,/ And the clouds perish'd; Darkness had no need/ Of aid from them – She was the Universe."

Philmus found herself shivering. She stacked the pages and placed them on the desk.

Byron's eyes, bright in the gloom, were fixed on her. "I was watching you; your lips moved. The image of the birds disturbed you. Did it not? Despite yourself."

She shrugged, trying to be casual. "Why is this so important to you, Hillegas? Why were you prepared to risk breaking the law?"

His imperfectly focused face worked. "Didn't the poem sound *prescient* to you, as if it were predicting a future – *our* future, of ecological and climatic collapse? Look, Philmus – what if the poem describes, not just a dream, but a *vision*?"

And suddenly she saw it, whole and entire. "Oh, Christ," she said, disgusted. "You think this poem of Byron's is a prophecy of our own time? *That's* what this is all about?"

"What if it's true?" Hillegas said rapidly. "What if the poem is telling us that all our efforts to stave off the eco-collapse are going to fail? If we've tipped the earth's climate too far away from its life-bearing quasi-stability, perhaps we can't recover. The starship program is a joke, but maybe it's the only hope. Maybe –"

She threw the manuscript papers back on the desk, disappointed at the foolishness, the mundanity of it all.

I might have known there would be something like this behind it all. Something pre-rational.

Despite her protests to Hillegas, Philmus had actually started her own career in scientific research, and had drifted into police work when she'd become intrigued by the way scientific progress threw up previously unimaginable new crimes – like the illegal creation of sentience. She'd kept up with her reading on science and technology, though. And she'd watched, with despair, the tendency towards irrationalism grow over her lifetime; it was as if humanity was slipping back into the dream landscape, of gods and supernatural causes, it had inhabited before the Enlightenment. And just at the worst moment, given the multiple crises facing the species.

The advance of technology didn't seem to help. *In fact this is a classic example*, she thought. *This dumb kid is actually using Virtual technology – millions of mips of processing power – to reinforce his own spooky, superstitious obsessions about Byron's clairvoyance.*

All she could hope to do now was to resolve this sad situation, with as little pain as she could manage to the thing that called itself Byron.

"Come on, Hillegas. You're an educated kid – a Stanford student, for God's sake. How could Byron foretell the future? I'm just a cop, but even I know enough about the Uncertainty Principle to know clairvoyance isn't possible.

"And we don't need visions of the future to explain that poem. We're *already* plunged into a world of darkness – here, in 1816 – thanks to that volcano of yours. You told me what a mess Byron's personal life is; and he's ingesting plenty to mess up his head... Christ, I'm no psychoanalyst, but what would you expect him to write – 'Oh, What A Beautiful Morning'?"

Byron's eyes flickered between the two of them, fascinated, perhaps amused.

"No." Hillegas shook his head, stubborn, barely listening to her. "There's more to it than that. I know there is."

Byron turned to Hillegas. "What is it you want from me?"

Hillegas breathed hard, and his artificial face looked flushed; this was clearly the moment, Philmus thought, towards which he'd been working, the crux of it all. "I want to know about the dream," he said. "Tell me about the dream. Not as you've interpreted the raw material in the poem – *what did you actually see?*"

Byron picked up his empty pistol, toying with it thoughtfully. "Even if it were true," he said, "that my dream were such a future vision – how could I tell you of it? For – so you have informed me – I am a simulacrum. I am *not* the poet. I do not share his thoughts, his visions – his dreams." He looked scared, Philmus thought, at this statement of the shallowness of his own identity; but he faced them, defying them to answer.

Hillegas tried to explain. "You aren't Byron. But you *are* a good reconstruction. The processors – the machines which are sustaining you – have access to everything you wrote, or which was written about you. And the machines are pretty smart; the science of the mind, and the techniques of textual analysis, have advanced a lot since your day. We can *interpolate* – make guesses about your state of mind. What you are experiencing internally is not authentic Byron. It couldn't be. But it's as good a guess as can be made."

Byron frowned and raised his fists to his eye-sockets, in a dramatic gesture that Philmus was coming to recognize as typical of him. "Then why is it that your *guess* is so inadequate?"

Hillegas looked uneasy. "What do you mean?"

With sudden violence Byron brushed the manuscript from the desk; as the papers fluttered and fell Philmus was reminded, oddly, of the birds in the poem. "I mean," Byron shouted, "that I can remember nothing of my dream – nothing of the intensity of vision I *know* I experienced. You have remade me, sir, but you have made me incomplete! – so much so that I cannot even progress my work; I can barely pen a note for the baker." He got out of his chair and paced to the window, his deformed foot thudding against the carpet. "Oh, damn this gloom! Will it never end?"

Hillegas, grim-faced, turned to Philmus. "I need more mips," he said. "I told you. *He* needs more mips."

"I'm not going to authorize it, Hillegas."

Byron turned. He was silhouetted by the grey light beyond the window, and candlelight shone over his face, making him look younger. His deep eyes flickered between their faces, alert and haunted, and Philmus felt a prickle of unease. "What is he saying?" he asked her softly. "*Can* you make me whole?"

"No," she said quickly. "I mean – it's not like that, sir. It's not as simple –"

Suddenly his rage erupted again. He tore at his hair; great clumps of it came away in his hands, speckled with blood. "I cannot live like *this*!" he roared. "I am half what I was – less; I am an empty gourd. Fill me, or smash me!"

"Do it," Hillegas hissed. "Come on, Philmus. Authorize the extra mips. It's obviously for the benefit of the sentient, in this case. And –"

"And what?"

"And – no matter what you think of me and my ideas about the poem – *we might learn the truth.*"

Byron's eyes were huge before her, filled with reflections of candlelight. The pain etched into his reconstructed face was extraordinary, as graphic as a wound.

She thought again of the poem's image of the birds, falling to the ground.

Oh, Christ.

She sub-voced an authorization code.

Byron stepped away from her, his eyes alive, his mouth half open. "I... My word," he said softly. "It is as if I have returned to life."

"It's an illusion, sir," Philmus warned. "You're no more alive – no more Byron – than you were before."

Hillegas was breathing hard. He stepped close to Byron. "But the dream. Have you retrieved the dream?"

Byron's gaze became reflective, as if looking inward. "Yes. Oh, yes." He turned his face up to Hillegas, his mouth set hard.

Hillegas laughed, a triumphal sound that was ugly to Philmus. "Show me," he said; and he sub-voced.

The simulation – the Villa, the lake, the cloud-cloaked sky – all of it disappeared, as soundlessly as if a bubble had burst. For a moment the three of them, in their heavy 19th-century clothes, were suspended in grey light.

And then a storm of pixels closed around them.

A sticky, moist heat hit Philmus immediately, soaking into her heavy, multi-layered dress. There was grass under her feet, long and damp. Gravity turned on again, and she stumbled. Byron, beside her, caught her arm.

Savanna:

The three of them stood isolated at the centre of a vast bowl of grass. Perhaps three miles away there was a lake, small and brackish, and beyond that a range of hills, climbing into mountains. The lower flanks of the mountains were cloaked in forest, and their summits were wreathed in smoke clouds. More clouds, grey and shot with black, coated the sky, growing lighter only at the horizon opposite the mountains.

Philmus heard a remote bellowing. She saw animals working across the plain, two or three miles away. They might have been elephants; they were huge and grey, and tusks gleamed white in the unnatural light of the cloud-shot sky.

"God," Hillegas said. "What a place." He pulled open his collar.

Byron grinned; of the three of them he was the only one who looked remotely comfortable in his open-necked shirt. "We are in my dream," he said simply.

"Where do you think we are?" Hillegas asked Philmus. "Africa?"

"When is maybe more to the point," Philmus murmured. "No part of Africa is like this in our time, Hillegas." There were no elephants left in Africa, or anywhere else, outside the zygote banks.

Hillegas said uncertainly, "What do we do now?"

Byron laughed. He cast about and pointed. "There's a track – see, where the grass has been beaten down? It leads towards the lake. Come. We will walk." And, without waiting for acquiescence, he turned and led the way.

Philmus found it difficult to keep up with Byron's pace, despite his limp. Her 1816 shoes had flat, soft soles, and soon her feet ached.

Hillegas grumbled, "This damn heat –"

"Stop complaining," Philmus snapped. "This was your idea, remember?"

"Do you think there's vulcanism, in that mountain range up ahead?"

Obviously. She ignored Hillegas, and concentrated on following Byron across the uneven ground.

After a few hundred yards, Philmus felt as if she would melt inside her dress, so she ripped it open and cast it away. The dress lay on the grass like an abandoned blue flag, vivid in the overcast gloom. She pulled off a few layers of underskirts, and opened her chemise sufficiently to allow the air to get to her skin. She didn't care what Hillegas thought of this, of course, but she felt a frisson of embarrassment when Byron paused and turned to look at her. He laughed, once, then proceeded with his vigorous limping towards the lake. He seemed to be singing.

The remote elephants seemed unaware of them. From a stand of trees, Philmus thought she saw a human face peering out at them; but it resolved itself into the scowl of a cat – perhaps a lion – with long sabre teeth protruding over its lower jaw. In the lake ahead, she saw what looked like flamingoes. And she almost tripped over a lizard, hiding in the undergrowth at her feet; it was a foot long, with three sharp horns protruding from its crest. It scampered away from her and then sat in the grass, its huge eyes fixed on her.

They passed a skull, perhaps of an antelope, bleached of flesh. It had been cracked open by a stone arrowhead – little more than a shaped pebble – embedded in a pit in the bone. Byron bent down and prised out the arrowhead with his fingers.

The savanna seemed somehow deserted, and the rapid evolutions and shifting light of the volcanic sky lent the world a sense of impermanence, of urgency and flight. This was a doomed landscape, Philmus felt.

She found the corpse of a bird. She couldn't identify its species. Its feathers were blackened, its beak gaping; she surmised it had flown into volcanic gas and dust, and had fallen out of the sky.

If this was a dream, it had a remarkable clarity, consistency and internal logic. For the first time, she began to wonder if Hillegas had, after all, stumbled on some kind of truth. *And all of this*, she mused, *interpolated from the words of a poem.*

At last, after perhaps two miles, Byron drew to a halt. "Look," he whispered, pointing ahead towards the lake shore.

Philmus squinted; it was difficult to see through the gloom, and at first she could make out only vague shapes, like low hillocks. Some animal moved between the shapes: tall, lean, like an ape – *walking upright.*

Suddenly the image resolved itself. The "hillocks" were crude huts, cones of branches woven together. The branches were anchored by stones to the ground. There were perhaps a dozen huts in the little village. Philmus saw hides hanging from a rack before one hut, weighted by threaded stones. From some of the huts threads of smoke rose up to join the roiling clouds, and Philmus was reminded of her distant view of the houses along Lac Léman.

The huts were arranged in a rough circle, and in a clear, trampled area at the centre of the circle, a number of adults had gathered. They were naked, dark-skinned. They were piling tools – spears and stone-bladed axes, choppers, cleavers and scrapers, together with skins and what looked like crude cooking pots – into a heap in the clearing. The people spoke to each other with short, sharp barks which carried across the grass to Philmus; they were clearly cooperating and communicating, and they worked seemingly oblivious of the immense vulcanism behind them. The people looked under-nourished to Philmus: gaunt, skinny.

A child came limping out of one of huts, pursued by a guttural barking. Her belly was swollen, evidently by malnutrition, the skin stretched and translucent.

Abruptly, one of the adults stepped away from the central group. It was a woman. She raised her head to the air, cavernous nostrils flaring; her face was flat, her jaw projecting. Philmus saw how a thick bank of muscle at the back of her neck made it difficult for her to lift her head.

The woman turned, seeming to look directly into Philmus's eyes.

"They're human." Hillegas's breath was shallow, excited.

"No," Philmus said softly. "Look at the thick eyebrow ridges, the skull's long, low shape, the shelving forehead –"

"Do you recognize them?"

"Yes." *But this is only a dream, for Christ's sake...* "I think these people are *Homo Erectus*. The precursor to *H. Sap.*"

"I do not understand," said Byron, and Hillegas proceeded to give him a condensed summary of the evolutionary rise of humanity. Philmus studied the woman. She could see her ribs and the shape of her skull. Her dug were slack and pendulous, and her pubic hair was a tangled triangle.

She worked her memory. *Erectus* had flourished from a million and a half to maybe 200,000 years ago. But the tools and techniques of the group before her appeared crude. So they were a primitive variant – she was probably deeper than a million years into the past – and this, therefore, must be the Rift Valley, in East Africa, where *Erectus* first evolved. *But it's only a dream, Philmus!*

She related this to Hillegas and Byron.

The poet rubbed his chin and stared speculatively at the *Erectus* woman. "I am impressed by your erudition," Byron said. "But whatever the provenance of these people, it appears we may not enjoy their company long."

"What do you mean?"

He waved a hand. "They are evidently packing to leave."

"I guess they're fleeing the vulcanism," Hillegas said. He peered about, at the iron sky lowering over the little human village. "The real question is: *why are we here?* If this is your dream landscape –"

"And it is," Byron insisted. "Although I saw it only in fragments, remembered it in shards... I assembled my poem after much meditation."

"I suppose you rationalized the dream vision, of a world you couldn't comprehend, into a narrative that made some sense to you. *But where did the dream come from?*" Hillegas turned to Philmus. "I mean, Byron couldn't possibly have known of the existence of *Homo Erectus* – of eras like this."

Philmus sighed. "I have an open mind, Hillegas. Despite being a cop for so long. Do you want to hear what I think?"

"Tell me."

"I think you were partly right, after all. Byron's *Darkness* dream was a vision of another time. But not of the future – ours or any other – *but of the remote past.*"

Hillegas stared at her.

"Look," she said patiently, "it's not impossible to imagine we might share inherited memories – records of traumatic, devastating times. In Byron's case, perhaps his personal instability – forgive me, sir – his use of drugs, and the unique conditions of the 'year without a summer,' all combined to release ancestral visions buried inside the deepest, oldest part of his brain."

Byron bowed his head ironically.

Hillegas frowned, looking confused. "I don't understand. Memories of disasters? Like what?"

"You're depressingly ignorant, Hillegas." She waved a hand. "This is the Rift Valley vulcanism interval of a million and a half years ago. Tectonic shifts, upwells of magma... The ecology and climate collapsed – with a devastating impact on the primitive variant of *Erectus* who had evolved here.

"They had been the most advanced and prosperous hominids in the world. But now their game fled, or died; their wells and lakes became stagnant or dry; the climate became impossibly unstable, even lethal."

"And did the people die?" Byron asked.

"Many of them," Philmus said. "But not all. They learned new techniques, evolved further; they increased their mobility and varied their diet. And they migrated, seeking better homes.

"They spread out of Africa, to Europe, East Asia, Java..."

"So. The near extinction of a race of evident intelligence, followed by a Diaspora lasting a million years." Byron gazed at the village. "A fine candidate for this 'racial memory' you postulate."

Philmus turned to study the people, as they assembled their crude belongings. "A disaster, yes. Of course. But also a beginning. The great migration was the making, the shaping, of *Erectus* – of the human line as a whole."

Byron nodded. "And thus, in that dark future of your own of which you have hinted, perhaps there

are also seeds for hope – that from all your pain and anguish, a new Diaspora may be generated, which will lead the race to new, unimagined heights."

Philmus thought of the first starships – crude, underfunded things – being assembled in Lunar orbit. "Perhaps," she said. "Sir, I outlined your rights earlier. Have you decided what you want to do? Do you need more time?"

Byron still carried the arrowhead; now he tossed it into the air, testing its weight and running his fingers over its surface. "I doubt that more time will benefit me, my dear. In these last few hours, you have demolished my world for me – what I remembered as my world, at any rate.

"I cannot return home – for my home does not exist, has not these past two centuries; and in any case, *I* did not travel from there. Besides, I was already in exile, in Switzerland. I am as displaced as those poor, naked creatures over there."

He threw away the arrowhead and grinned at Philmus. "I have a fancy to throw in my lot with these people. A man with a brain might build a life for himself, here. Some of the women look as if they might be – co-operative. Besides, I have never been shy of adventure. Did you know I once swam the Hellespont? Is that still remembered?"

"Yes," she said. "Yes, we remember."

"May I stay here? Is it possible?"

"It's your right. We'll make it so. This world will be maintained as long as you need it. And you'll not be disturbed."

They stood awkwardly for a moment. "Well," Byron said. "Perhaps you will think of me. *Benedetto te, e la terra che ti fara!*"

Hillegas murmured, "A Venetian benediction. 'May you be blessed, and the earth which you will make...'"

"Oddly apposite – don't you think?" Byron said. He clapped Hillegas's shoulder, bent to kiss Philmus gently on the forehead, and made along the path, his vigorous limp carrying him away rapidly.

Philmus breathed the muggy air, and pulled the tatters of her undergarments around her. "At least you'll get your doctorate out of this, Hillegas. And you'll have plenty of time in jail to write up your thesis."

Hillegas still appeared confused; he shrugged.

After 50 yards, Byron turned. "Scholar! Tell me this. Did I die well?"

Philmus knew Byron had never returned to England. He had died of malaria, and the clumsy ministrations of his doctors, in Greece at the age of 36.

Hillegas called: "You die gloriously, sir."

Byron laughed, waved, and turned towards the village. Philmus saw how the *Erectus* were watching his approach.

Philmus sub-voced, and she fell into the light.

Stephen Baxter is fast becoming a superstar of the sf firmament, with Arthur C. Clarke (no less) describing his latest novel, *The Time Ships*, as "the most outstanding work of imaginative fiction since Olaf Stapledon" (no less). Steve's next novel will be called *Ares*.



The third strangest thing about the end of the world is that it should have happened when it did. I know it wasn't my fault but somehow I can't help feeling responsible. Guilty even, because I am still here. The second strangest thing is that even after the end of the world, the world is still here too. This really isn't how I'd imagined it at all. And the strangest thing? Well, let me explain the whole story.

When they first arrived on Earth the Lons had appeared as misshapen ants of approximately the same size as small water buffaloes. They had glistening black-green metallic carapaces and six legs, two of which had finger-equivalent jointed ends with intricate powers of manipulation. Lons were able to see huge distances and hear and smell and intuit at a level that was unimaginable to native humans. They were infinitely intelligent and absolutely impervious. They arrived very suddenly in large spaceships at several hundred strategic points on the Earth's surface and crushed initial resistance with phenomenal ease. The whole world had had to capitulate and agree an unconditional surrender before there was even any idea what the invaders' demands would be.

The whole thing had taken under a couple of hours. It was like a superpower invading a playground. Despite this, the next day some commentators were still asserting that the invasion was just a hoax, a re-run of the legendary *War of the Worlds* spoof from the previous century.

"Ah, yes ... Orville Wells," they said to each other knowingly.

But they were wrong.

That was the big picture, the galacto-political context. But my own life of course continued to be lived on a somewhat smaller scale and as time passed and the reality of the new world order became established I, along with everyone else, affected to believe that all was well. Or at least as well as it was ever again going to get.

Some years after the invasion, I was sitting in the park one afternoon minding my own business. There wasn't much going on; a few bagladies, a few strollers. I was not alone on the bench but I had really not bothered to assess my neighbour very closely. Then suddenly, as my attention was taken by the appearance of a random passer-by, a stray phrase popped

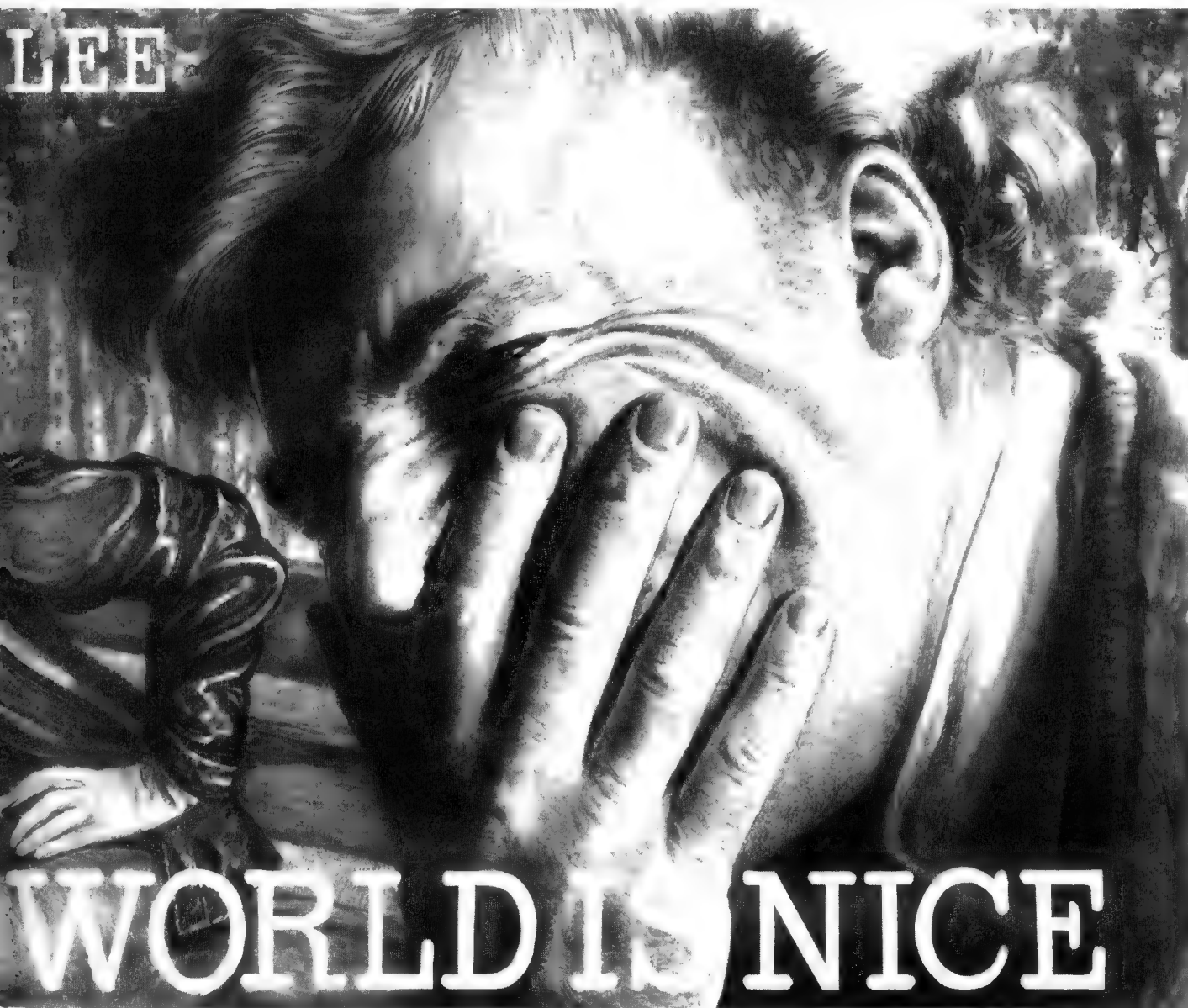


Illustration by Gerry Grace

out of my mouth. It was an all too casual observation about someone who looked at a glance like one of us but who, when I saw him returning the glance with a dark emerald stare, was all too clearly one of Them. My reckless words, uttered more for my own benefit than for that of the person sitting on the other end of the bench, and certainly not for the walker, came out more audibly than I had intended and as soon as they were out I knew I had made a grave mistake. So many years of carefulness undone in a single minute! I could've bitten off my tongue.

I had been sitting on the bench for almost an hour. The day had been pleasantly warm. The sun sparkled prettily on the lake and in the black eyes of the ornamental ducks. Although it was one of the first such days of spring, the pink blossom was already beginning to flower on the cherry trees. I had spent the morning at my part-time job repatriating Koreans and was feeling secretly satisfied with a job well done. Things were generally going pretty well. The niggling cold I had had for several weeks had cleared up, I had new shoes and a ticket for the match on Saturday. My picture postcard business was thriving quietly without attracting undue attention. And for

lunch I had feasted on a prawn, bacon and mushroom roll from a local sandwich bar and spent a restful interlude daydreaming poignantly about holidays and the lost freedoms of the past.

Then I had started thinking about what I would attempt to cook Margery for supper. I had met Margery at a poetry evening in the local library three weeks earlier. This was the first time that I had invited her round to my house and even at my age I was nervous about making a good impression. Still, despite everything, life (in a limited personal sense) had been looking good.

Until now.

I had spoken with the same unthinking spontaneity as when remarking on the weather, unconsciously assuming that the figure sitting alongside me on the bench was a natural human. But a lovely day it now was not.

Once upon a time my comment might have seemed innocent enough, but since the "visitors" arrived on Earth, any expression of individuality or indulgence of personal preference was suspect. If the remark were tinged with sarcasm and directed at one of Them, it would almost certainly be regarded as sedi-

tion. My self-discipline had slipped badly and the punishment might be severe. True, my bench-mate had given no reaction; but there was something in the absence of even the most perfunctory uh-uh of acknowledgement that immediately made hairs rise on my neck. It was the wrong sort of no reaction.

I turned and looked into her eyes (for it was a woman). And of course there, as in the returned glance of the passer-by, were the tiny greenblack facets in the iris, the telltale last remaining traces of the alien insect ancestry, the feature they had kept (we thought) as a deliberate reminder of their difference and our subjugation. The pupils gave just enough of a twitch to make me realize that the significance of my words, such as it was, had sunk in.

I prepared to meet my Maker or the Void, assuming, no doubt wrongly, that I would be able to tell the difference.

"Length of trouser is a very personal thing."

These were the words so fatefully uttered. This was the seditious incitement to individualistic sartorialism that I had murmured so unthinkingly, so sardonically, so suicidally.

Why had I blurted out such a tactless remark? Perhaps I was somehow sublimating illicit feelings of personal pride and satisfaction over my good morning's work; perhaps it was the weather; perhaps it was an impulsive desire to show off in front of someone. Especially in front of someone I didn't know. Yes, all right, especially a woman! Whatever it was, my attention had been diverted momentarily and when I had noticed what appeared to be a man walking past the bench wearing trousers a good two inches too short for his legs, I had responded whimsically, casting off without thought my normal craven veneer of anonymity. I did not remember when I had last had the occasion to use the rare singular of trousers and, frankly, it was an opportunity I could not bring myself to forgo. In these difficult times of tension and fear, just to hear such a pointlessly trivial and archaic phrase pass my lips provoked an experience of freedom and nostalgia that made my insides palpitate as with the release of a thousand butterflies.

I sat unmovingly. My companion sat, unmoved. Action, events, progress, incidents and movements were in short supply. Who could say what internal processing was churning through my co-recreationist's insect psyche? As I sought to grasp the enormity of what I had done, I found that my thoughts regressed to a suburban childhood landscape of fenced-off houses and poorly defined road junctions. I could feel the calmness of a life in which catastrophe was still in the realm of fantasy, in which right and wrong were still serious concepts and in which the Prime Minister was a human. I remembered how as a child in the 1980s I would feel free to stun imaginary enemies with replica phasers, how I would sit in front of video screens as alien hordes descended from azure skies, picking them off with miraculously accurate fastfire from directed-energy plasma guns. What sort of bizarre mental escape hatch was this? It was as though I was rejecting the present and trying to

get far back before the tragic blurting had happened, hoping to re-engineer the past somehow so that it would *not* happen. Phasers. Phrases. Who was it who wrote about wordplay in dreams?

I also remembered once when our house had suffered an infestation. I had come in one evening with my parents from a school function and found ants swarming across the kitchen floor, bursting like dark spray from a crack at the bottom of the skirting board. My father had fetched the kettle and poured boiling water across the floor and into the crack, killing hundreds with a steaming tide. I remember how calmly he did it, later mopping up the tiny corpses with a cloth and sluicing them down the sink like coffee grounds. When the floor was clean again he squeezed some lethal gel by the entrance to their cave and said, "There, they won't be back in a hurry."

It was about 30 years later that the invasion happened. Though I was grown up by that time and supposed to be rational, I could not help feeling that I was not the only one who had not forgotten the boiling water and the toxic gel. One had read such blood-curdling accounts of the capacity of insects to adapt and develop immunity to the favoured poisons of earlier generations.

My companion on the bench saw only my grey impassive features as this torrent of memory and imagination whirled inside me. I was careful to confine the activity to the inside of my skull. But even as the terror gripped me, I was detached enough to observe the strange and intricate relationship between memory, imagination and freedom. The more memory you have and the more that memory feeds imagination, then the more free you feel inside and the more you suffer the frustration of external constraint. I remembered a time when... I could imagine a world where... I could see it, touch it, smell it, inside; but when my eyes refocused on the cherry blossom, the lake and the figure beside me on the bench, it was like a cold hand on my heart. None of this showed. If I have learned nothing else in the years since the invasion, I have at least taken to heart that although those of my bench-buddy's ilk can read every minute flicker of expression and body language, they cannot (yet) read our minds.

It was time to move but I didn't. I felt I needed to go somewhere, to make something else happen. If I did, perhaps the last thing that had happened would not seem so important. But I wanted my fellow public recreationist to move first so that I could avoid being followed. I stayed put and let my mind roam on.

I haven't said much about Margery. The trouble with Margery, although she was an excellent librarian, was that she had spectacles with wings and a hairstyle that curved around into points that were so close to the corners of her mouth that she could not prevent herself from chewing them when she was concentrating. She also had an alarmingly direct manner of speech. If one made a whimsical remark to her, she would simply say, "Don't be so bloody stupid," and if one tried to tell her that her eyes reminded one of moonlight dappling on a moss-dark mountain

stream she would say the same, probably with a stronger expletive.

Margery took a sensible attitude to librarianship. It was a matter of classifying the books, of developing some decent ordering, stock control and issuing systems, of keeping abreast of the latest computerization techniques and of knowing how to put people on the right track. You didn't have to read Plato to know he was a Greek; you didn't have to approve of Fourier transformations to let people know where the mathematics section was.

Also, unfortunately, she wore chiropodistically recommended clogs with pale blue nylon slacks. The slacks were invariably too short and too tight and they never matched the blouse or cardigan she wore on her upper half. This was not a creature who would turn heads in the street. But if you needed something sorting out or a knee bandaged then Margery was the woman for you. She really was tremendously well organized. She had beautiful dark brown eyes and she seemed so sad and lonely when I met her.

I admit it. I was in love.

I had told acquaintances that I had met Margery at a poetry evening but in fact I had first met her through an advertisement I had placed for models for my postcard business. I had mentioned in the advert that looks were unimportant and Margery had said that she had been intrigued by the reference to inoffensive novelty poses. She had led a life preoccupied with bibliography, not romance, and to be honest probably regarded herself as left on the shelf. She would have been well within her rights to have rejected my offer of work on the grounds that I was nothing more than a sad old voyeur; but somehow she seemed unfazed by my admittedly unusual modelling requirements.

My afternoon hobby had become a part-time business and provided some small private solace in these difficult times. My job at the Ministry of Repatriation paid the major bills but in order to make ends overlap rather than just meet, I was developing this sideline. Originally I had drawn cartoons and sold them to some of the popular weekly magazines: pictures of animals in eccentric settings, perhaps a dog in a pram or a cow waiting at a busstop. They appealed to a taste for the bizarre. My most successful and particular innovation, however, had been the idea of picture postcards depicting close-up photographs of female breasts graffitized so that they looked like the heads of pigs or mice. Pigs, mostly. A bit of black body paint to give them eyes and a mouth, leaving the nipple representing the snout. Sometimes I would stick on a bit of a hat. Sometimes add a few whiskers; it really depended on the basic material one had to work with. Is it a pig? Is it a mouse? They really were extremely amusing and popular.

Also, though it was impossible to verify – impossible even to suggest the hypothesis – I liked to think that, as well as being a bit of harmless fun for tourists, their ironical content, however evanescent, represented the only underground and subversive manifestation in the world. Rebellion was not totally dead. (This was immeasurably more comfortable

than thinking that they represented an underground and subversive element in my psyche.) The Lons seemed to tolerate them, but only, I believe, because they could not understand them.

I would be the first to admit that this lifestyle tended to inch me out towards the fringes of society and that I was getting on a bit and not much of a catch. But I swear it was Margery who made the first advances, albeit while I was drawing a comic bowler hat over a mouse-face I had sketched on her left breast. I am afraid I am one of those people who sticks his tongue out when he's drawing. Perhaps she thought I was being provocative.

But enough about me. While this impasse of inactivity persisted, my thoughts turned to the big picture, the sweep of history, the galacto-political wossname.

Before the invasion the Earth had been enjoying a Golden Age and, unlike all previous such epochs, which had been unrecognized until long after they were over, the peoples of the world had been conscious of this one as it happened. Wars had evaporated; racial, ethnic, cultural, political and economic strife had been resolved and the very ideas of nationhood, property, ideology and religion – all the things that had caused such misery in the past – had somehow ceased to have any troublesome meaning. People worked happily at whatever they felt best suited for and were rewarded according to their need. No one was homeless; no one felt insecure. The toughest hardship anyone had to bear was to be the butt of a little gentle ribbing. And that didn't last long before everyone was all smiles and friends again.

In retrospect it seemed as though this universal harmony had developed extraordinarily quickly. The Iron Curtain came down, South Africa went democratic, Ireland, the Middle East, Korea – all reunited. It was staggering how fast ... But perhaps it was just that the time had been right. The great Cycle had been completed, or the great Pendulum of Time had reached its apogee, or the universal inhalation had filled the Cosmic Lungs, or ...

There was a sort of symmetry about it. Just when the planet was really beginning to take shape; when the humans had begun to feel that at last they were in charge, at that very moment the human race had had to surrender unconditionally and hand the whole thing over to Monster Insects from Beyond the Void. The only thing not surrendered, or so people believed in their secret heart of hearts, was the human spirit.

The invaders, for reasons which may become clear in due course, came to be known as the Laws of Nature: "Lons" for short.

My thoughts seemed determined to stay clear of my immediate situation on my park bench. Could you blame them?

Although the Lon's eyes showed that she had taken in my unguarded remark, there was still no reaction. They did not, unaccountably, show the onset of the usual automatic reflex, which would have been to vaporize me. I knew that she would be able to play back what I had said whenever she wanted. (Satellite

surveillance was complete and detailed.) I knew I was guilty enough in her greenblack prismatic eyes but I could not guess what had caused this stay of execution. Something would happen, but until it did, I would have a future of some sort to look forward to, even if it was only eradication. I felt resigned. It was a feeling we had become quite good at.

Some pelicans lumbered out of the lake and stood with their wings outstretched. I saw them as pantomime dwarves, shrugging their shoulders as my fate was decided by the secret councils of the Lonocracy.

The Earth, as a matter of fact, had accepted the original invasion with a quite stunning degree of collective equanimity. This could have been because the invasion had been so massively and rapidly total (resistance was useless, as it were); it could have been because the Arcadian temperament, suddenly developed over the first decades of the new millennium, had lost the will to resist. Whatever the reason, almost everyone had unexpectedly realized, once they discovered that they were not going to be immediately and collectively annihilated, that the end of Human supremacy was, all things considered, acceptable.

This wasn't a real feeling, of course, but in the circumstances it was the best available.

Most of the world was happy to decide that a nightmare shared was no nightmare at all.

Within weeks of the Lons' initial landing, articles started appearing in the non-conformist press that effectively took the Lons' side. They argued that the benefits that the Lons brought with them – of advanced technology, of galactic knowledge, of guaranteed security – were so far-reaching that the loss of human dominion over the planet was a price worth paying. That dominion, they argued, had been overrated anyway, and from the point of view of, for example, an earthquake or a hurricane, it had always been more illusory than real. This comparison of the visitors to natural forces started early and soon became orthodoxy. That some were willing to take this unexpectedly lenient view of the subjugation of the entire human race to an alien power was perhaps not so surprising – throughout history there have been those who welcomed invading hordes – no, what was remarkable this time was the way in which virtually the entire population of the planet embraced these sentiments, as though the end of humanity were as natural as sunshine.

Of course the apologists were quick to point out that it was.

I got off the bench and left the park. The Lon did not follow me. No need. They knew where I was. At first I tried to make my way back to my place of work but it was not easy to force my way through the crowds. A visiting Head of State was processing towards the official residence of our own revered King and for some reason a lot of people were trying to get a look at the carriages. Crowds were among the safest places, of course, as it was easy to submerge one's individuality in the throng. The people pressed close together and shouted slogans in unison. Everyone seemed to

be waving little black and green flags. The Head of State waved and smiled, smiled and waved, like an automaton, and a squadron of cavalry rode before his carriage in perfect step. At strategic points along the route the Lonaic antigods watched approvingly.

I lingered for a while and allowed myself to be carried along by the crowds. In any case I was desperately cleft in my mind about whether to hurry home to immerse myself in my postcards or whether I should not try in some way to 'escape'. The frisson of danger, death, anarchy, revolution and freedom that had welled up in me since the trouser remark seemed incompatible with my attempts to carve out a unique niche in the specialist world of humorous picture postcards. Irony had run out of control. In any case it seemed inconceivable that I would now be allowed to continue what had previously passed as my approximation to normal life. The remark about trousers was all they needed. I knew my postcard business was impenetrable to them – like an uncrackable code of humanness. They could not see that it was subversive but now surely they would begin to suspect. What would happen to me? What would happen to Margery?

I had a studio attached to a small house in an unfashionable inner suburb. Although part of me wanted to get back there because it was somewhere I felt safe, somewhere in which I could think without distraction, another rational voice was telling me that that was where they would pick me up. I was like a frightened animal, desperate to get back to its burrow, to cling to those it loved, to go home; but I was also a calculating, self-conscious being who was looking for an escape route with better chances. But how can one escape the Laws of Nature?

I decided to walk home by a different route. Not because I thought this would provide a physical escape but because it would provide a conceptual one. I walked through unfamiliar streets and let the sounds and sights wash over me like an existential sea while I thought things over. I wanted to review how things had got to this endgame. No-one could see my mental sandwich board but I had had a premonition that the end of the world was... well... nigh.

Having had the luck(?) to invade a planet that, in their terms, had virtually no means or will to resist, the Lons soon demonstrated that they were not going to allow the re-emergence of ancient strains of human behaviour. We never got anywhere near guerrilla warfare, terrorism, or even isolated riots. The Lons did not really know where to stop in order to inhibit rebellious atavism and so eventually started to come down heavily on expressions of personal opinion or preference of any kind.

Each of us who survived had independently realized that survival depended on the adoption of total passivity and anonymity in relation to anything a Lon could construe as threatening. Their peculiar achievement was to demonstrate an absolute indifference to mitigation. The merest hint of anything untoward and vaporization followed instantly. To evince any sign of rebelliousness was equivalent to grasping a bare 40,000 volt cable. One just did not do

it. But not only that: one also inwardly acknowledged that freedom was thus qualified. The Lons had redefined our limits and they were, like the laws of nature, inescapable.

At first communication between humans and "visitors" (as we had to call them) had not been easy. Mathematical patterns had provided the bridge and once some basic correspondences had been established, the Lons moved with extra-terrestrial rapidity to produce a complete system of translation between their worldview and ours. Their prowess in adapting to the human way of thinking was so astonishing that it masked the likelihood that what we saw was in reality only a small subset of what their universe was like. In other words they began to seem rather like us, even though we knew they couldn't be.

It became apparent very soon after the invasion that the Lons' ability to adapt to human languages was matched by yet more impressive abilities to control their genetic development towards an anthropoid model. Only six months after they arrived, the first four-legged versions started to appear on the streets and six months after that two of the four legs had dwindled to represent arms. Their shells softened and the colouring became more muted. A year and a half later, the antennae had all but disappeared and the previously protuberant multifaceted eye sensors had ceased to resemble the rotating crystal balls hung in Mecca ballroom ceilings in ancient times (towards which some peoples apparently used to turn in prayer – a strange prefiguring of early Lon-worship) and became approximations of a human-style eyeball. The iris and pupil still looked like a cut stone in an engagement ring but the face around it became month by month less intimidatingly other. How they achieved this accelerated and controlled mutation no one knew and frankly there was no way of finding out. Most people assumed that they had mastered genetic manipulation to a high level of proficiency (as they appeared to have mastered everything else) and that really was the end of it.

So it went for a few years. Occasionally a Lon was attacked by some crazed malcontent but when this happened the individual was immediately identified and vaporized on the spot. The Lons themselves appeared to have some sort of impermeable coating that human science could not identify let alone overcome. They were impossible to shoot or stab. No Lon ever submitted itself to experimental study and such observations as were possible by clandestine means proved completely inconclusive. As soon as a human investigator got too close he or she was instantly vaporized without trace. There was no redress. Occasionally a voice was raised suggesting that there was a need for a resistance movement; from time to time rumours of an underground surfaced. But nothing of the sort ever took hold. It would have been like forming a resistance movement against time or gravity or death. The Lons were, after all, the Laws of Nature.

When I got home there had still been no sign of a vapour-bolt. I had not even been taken in for ques-

tioning. It was as though nothing *had* happened. When Margery came and we sat down to supper, I told her what had happened. She shrugged off the whole incident as though it were unimportant. She tried to suggest that almost nothing had happened.

"You said something silly and someone looked at you, that's all."

I was tired and tense.

"But don't you realize," I almost shouted at her. "I made an unguarded remark in the presence of a Lon. I said, more or less, that I believed in personal preferences. In their cut-glass eyes that's only half a step from insurrection."

"Why should they bother about you? To them you're a nobody," she replied.

She didn't seem to think it was that odd. She had been watching the television, which was showing the scenes of the visiting Head of State being greeted by our own dear King. Crowds swarmed across the park as they headed from the early part of the processional route to try and catch another glimpse at the end. There was a helicopter shot of the gathering crowds outside the royal palace. They were dots on the screen, moving together towards a single goal. The independence they felt at ground level was seen to be illusory. They were like an explosion in reverse, gathering to the point of detonation. The gib gnab. Like ants around a nest, they bustled collectively towards their unconscious desires.

"Look," said Margery. "We're not so different from the Lons really, are we?"

"I suppose not," I agreed, too tired to embark upon a fruitless discussion.

For the rest of the evening I sat morosely in my chair, watching the screen without really taking it in. I didn't want to move in case the spell was broken. As long as I sat in a cocoon of vacuity, nothing could get me; it was like a forcefield of apathy and aimlessness, an attempt to avoid exuding the scent of fear which predatory animals are said to be incensed by. Margery made one or two attempts to engage me in conversation but did not press too hard. She could obviously see that beneath the passive exterior some sort of revolution was taking place.

When the television shut down at midnight, as decreed, and I went upstairs, Margery was already in the bathroom. Our relationship had developed quickly and she had stayed over three or four times. I didn't think anything much about her being there, preoccupied as I was with my impending vaporization. I was still tense, probably breathing a little hard, probably moving a little suddenly. I burst into the bathroom without thinking and Margery was there at the washbasin, her back towards me. Her hands were just coming down from her face. She looked like someone who had just splashed water in their face, or was looking at bloodstains on their hands. Her head was bowed. When she raised it I could see her face in the mirror. It was a gentle face but different in one crucial respect from the face I had hardly bothered to look at for the rest of my troubled evening.

Her eyes were deep and shining and faceted like dark emeralds. Two large thin-film contact lenses

rested on the washbasin.

My first thought was that she was going to vaporize me, but instead she repeated what she had said downstairs:

"We're not so different from the Lons really, are we?"

She paused, probably waiting to see if I would faint. When I didn't, she said, "You'll be safe with me. It's the next stage."

"Why me?" I asked.

"The postcards," she said. "Your habit of making pointless remarks. Too much humanness we couldn't understand. We need to get inside a human skin."

"Get inside?"

She turned and looked into my eyes. I was struck (dumbstruck would be more like it) by how calm she was, how tolerant of this unmasking. I wondered for a moment or two whether she realized that I was, deep-down, a Lon-hating subversive. She didn't appear troubled in that way. Indeed, she seemed as little moved as the sun had been when it was found not to revolve around the Earth, as unperturbed as gravity when Einstein had pointed out its theoretical inadequacies. I, on the other hand, faced with this particular law of nature, began to feel, even deeper than deep-down, that my anti-Lonism was an existentially ineffectual self-indulgence. I had barely had time to notice that I still found Margery attractive, when she leaned forward and kissed me. Time stood still as she pressed herself upon me: slowly, longingly, tongueing. Getting inside.

It was a different form of vaporization to the one I had been expecting. Even as we edged back into the bedroom I had started wondering what colour the baby's eyes would be. Across the street, across the town, across the world, this scene – I later discovered – was being repeated in a million magical moments. The lights were going out all over the world. I wasn't so special after all.

But then everything that has happened was different from what I had expected. This, I realize, is another law of nature. Now I know what is happening it is too late. I am the end of humanity and this is the end of the world. And the strangest thing about the end of the world? Ah yes, the strangest thing is that it is... well... nice.

Ian Lee, who once wrote poetry (and it shows), last appeared here with "The Accepted Conventions of Space, Time and Reality" (*Interzone* 69). There has been a longish gap since then because he has been very busy in his day job as a civil servant. He lives in London, and is perhaps best remembered for such earlier stories as "Once Upon a Time in the Park" (*IZ* 30) and "Pigs, Mostly" (*IZ* 50).

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REVIEWED

Although I'm writing this a handful of weeks after the 53rd World Science Fiction Convention, held in Glasgow at the end of August, you'll be reading it around about Guy Fawkes Day. We are not yet all wired head to head, or squinting at the slaty screens of bookpersons. Information still flows across pulped wood; despite being crammed into the margins of the dealers' hall at the convention, the printed word has not yet been driven out by handicrafts, CD-ROMs, games, and the merchandise and spinoffery associated with media representations of sf.

No, one hundred years after *The Time Machine*, despite the mutterings of those measuring it up for its coffin, written sf is not yet dead. There's no doubt that a contraction is taking place: the boom begun in the 1980s, in which more and more titles competed for the same share of the market, and even moderate advances often failed to earn out, is coming to an end. It is not yet possible to predict how mainline sf will fare against the increasing popularity of instant books based on *Star Trek*, *The X-Files* and the rest. But while a contracting market is certainly bad news for the writers, it is not necessarily bad from the point of view of the readers – even the discerning readers – because for the last ten years no one, not even the most fanatical speedreading insomniac, has been able to keep up with the sheer volume of published sf. And despite the sharecroppers and the spinoffery and the plundering of the carcasses of the dinosaurs, as pointed out by Our Good Editor in *IZ* 100, there's still plenty of the true quill out there.

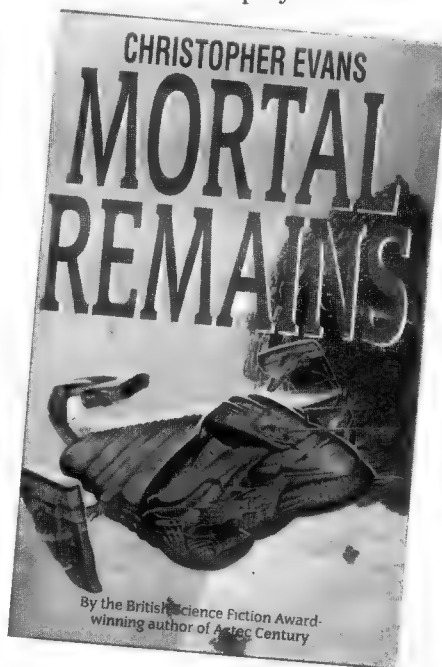
And from UK writers, at least, there's a sheaf of space-going sf in the works. For as NASA and the Russians let slip their eagerness to beat each other even to low orbit, let alone the stars, space is once more becoming the habitat of the imagination. We already have the British Killer B's, Iain M. Banks, Stephen Baxter and Eric Brown, storming the cosmos, not to mention Colin Greenland's retrofitted, hand-polished space operas, while Peter F. Hamilton is just delivered of the first volume of a vast space opera trilogy. And to turn to matters at hand, there is Christopher Evans's *Mortal Remains* (Gollancz, £16.99 hardback, £8.99 C-format paperback) which by a cunning narrative contrivance plays with the tropes and conventions of traditional space opera in rewarding and revealing ways.

Mortal Remains depicts a richly detailed, populous Solar System dominated by biotechnology which supports a dizzying array of habitats and a range of living machines, from animated bagpipes to muscular space-

Things to come, Inc.

Paul J. McAuley

ships which, powered by organic fission, fart their way into orbit. The living can communicate via prayer terminals with their dead relatives, whose essences have been translated into the Noosphere, a kind of cyberspace Valhalla. The translation into the afterlife and the traffic of prayers are con-



trolled by Arbiters, who in turn are ruled by a pair of High Arbiters. But this ordered, unified civilization is threatened by a mental plague believed to be spread by rebellious Augmenters; and an artificial womb is rescued from a spaceship that crashlands near a Martian settlement and becomes the focus of rebellion, a prize which corrupts or dooms all those, guilty or

innocent, who come into contact with it.

Thus far, *Mortal Remains* resembles the baroque, late-flowering space operas of Jack Vance or Fred Pohl and Jack Williamson: inventive, colourful and action-packed, but fairly superficial. However, it slowly becomes apparent that the multi-stranded story is relayed to us through the dreams of two amnesiac humans resurrected from frozen sleep, who must decide on what is true and what is good. The story becomes its own critical mirror. As various factions chase the womb, including the current brace of High Arbiters, who have refused to step down at the end of their allotted span, the two observers become linked with the protagonists via the Noosphere, and so begin to share and shape the action.

Evans has admitted that he mistrusts the simple-minded solutions promulgated by much sf. But by incorporating an autonomous critical apparatus within the narrative, he is able to playfully guy and manipulate conventions he clearly mistrusts, even while deploying them to great effect. All is mirrors: highly romantic interactive "space operas" are part of the culture, so that one of the characters is able to observe that "The five of them ... were made to suit up [in black leatherene bodysuits] so that another transformation took place: they looked like absurd stormtroopers out of *Augmenter Alert!*"

This cunningly subversive novel is marred only by a tendency to over-complicate the plot, which becomes less transparent as it progresses, and a certain weakness in the motivations of certain of the characters, especially those of the two servants of the Noosphere who feed the story to the observers – apart from sustaining the plot, it never is quite clear why their explanations are frustratingly evasive. Nevertheless, *Mortal Remains* is both a terrific romp through a densely constructed future, and an invigorating and enlightening dissection of the conventions that sf binds around its unrepentant heart, at its most powerful (given Evans's concentration on the fates of ordinary people caught up in the power struggle) in its explication of the irony that far future civilizations are founded on power-structures that entrust ultimate power to the unfettered whims of individuals. Evans has found a way to have his cake and eat it, and we can enjoy the feast too.

Foremost amongst those writers still speak from the heart of sf (which is located somewhere north, east, south and west of Kansas), those who believe that technology will continue to shape history and that the history it shapes will be largely



REVIEWED

American, is Greg Bear. His latest novel, *Legacy* (Tor, \$22.95; Legend, £15.99), marks a further advance in his thoughtful and knowledgeable dialogue with the conventions of mainline sf, fusing two tropes central to classic sf, the rite of passage and the voyage of discovery, in a narrative structure that spirals inwards towards an examination of humanity's darker impulses.

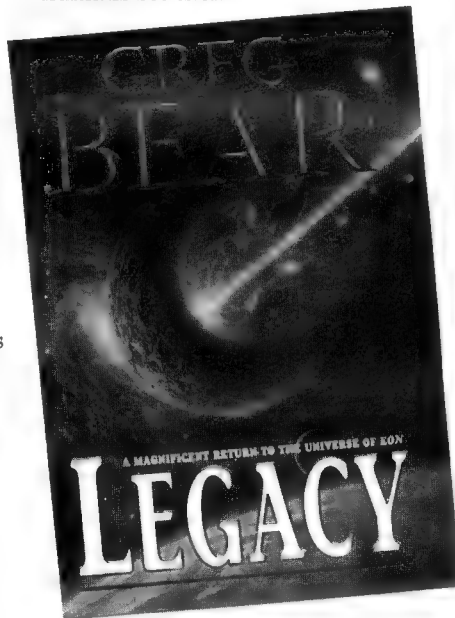
Legacy is a prequel to Bear's monumental hard-sf diptych *Eon* and *Eternity*, set on mankind's first starship some 700 years into its voyage, before it returned to the Earth of its past and the stories of the first two novels. It is soon after the opening of the Way, an infinitely long corridor through time and space that intersects the totality of all histories of all possible universes. The crew of the starship are divided between the conservative Naderites and the technophilic Geshels; Olmy, a major player in both previous novels, here a callow youth of 30, has just crossed over to the Geshel faction. To prove his loyalty, he is sent on a mission to discover what happened to a group of Naderites who opened a portal in the Way to an Earthlike planet, Lamarkia, and to retrieve the stolen device used to open the portal before the implacably hostile Jarts, who have infiltrated the Way, can intercept it.

Chief amongst the delights of *Legacy* is the novel yet convincingly consistent alien world which Bear has invented. It is divided into separate, self-sufficient continent-sized ecologies, or ecoi, that function as single organisms. Unseen queens continually monitor and redesign the scions, the constituent organisms of the ecoi. All scions within a single ecos cooperate for the greater good to the exclusion of intruders – a metaphor that points up the estrangement of the human colonists, and of Olmy, who must overcome the additional estrangement of being marooned on an alien planet among colonists whose philosophies are precisely what he is trying to leave behind.

Olmy stumbles onto a war between two factions of colonists. Maintaining the pretence that he is an explorer from a remote village, he signs up on an expedition which plans to voyage all the way around the world, to map and explore its ecoi. For half the book, Bear, one of the most inventive writers of contemporary sf, unfolds wonder after wonder as the expedition voyages into uncharted territory, uncovering teasing hints about the ecoi queens. For these alien landscapes alone, revealed in marvellous passages as densely and rigorously imagined as any in the sf canon, *Legacy* is urgently recommended.

But Bear is as concerned with

exploration of human nature as he is with explication of this alien world. Implacably, the two themes are brought together. After a disastrous encounter with an ecos which generates a perpetual storm, Olmy and the survivors of the expedition are taken to the capital of the rival faction of colonists, where they discover a potentially disastrous meddling with the ecos there, and learn of the true nature of the queens. The colonists cannot escape their own human nature. As Olmy observes, "When humans set their



minds on something, when we are forced into a corner, we can work miracles of destruction." In the end, all is transformed by a war between the ecos, with no place for the humans who triggered it, and Olmy is rescued and restored, having learnt his life's lesson.

Legacy is a splendidly inventive and mature work, drawing both on imaginative flights sustained with scientific rigour and on serious considerations in the flaws of human nature that drive us to exploration and to destruction. It ranks amongst Bear's best work to date, and therefore amongst the best of contemporary sf.

The Diamond Age (Viking, £9.99) is Neal Stephenson's take on nanotechnology, and is as swift and lushly inventive as his cyberspace novel *Snow Crash*. Indeed, the beginning of

The Diamond Age falsely promises a journey topologically congruent with the streetlevel milieu of *Snow Crash*: a rollerblading low-rent criminal gets himself an implanted gun, gets himself into trouble – and then gets executed, and disappears from the story. For this is merely preamble to the interbraided stories of Nell, the criminal's daughter, and John Percival Hackworth, a neo-Victorian nanotechnologist who makes an illicit copy of an interactive book, *A Young Lady's Illustrated Primer*, which falls into Nell's possession and begins to educate and train her as one of the elite in a rigidly stratified world.

The Diamond Age is a double-stranded rite-of-passage novel that accelerates on a rising curve, its two plots finally intersecting in a pell-mell, somewhat hasty and contrived climax. This, and the intricate conspiracy into which Hackworth becomes enmeshed (which, like the intricate secret history of *Snow Crash*, never quite lives up to its world-changing promise) are faults which prevent *The Diamond Age* being the flawless masterpiece it promises to be for much of its epic length. Nevertheless, it is the best by far of the recent crop of novels which use nanotechnology as their central premise. Stephenson explicates his detailed scenario, a Pacific Rim economy informed by knowingly explicated tensions between Chinese and Western values and enriched by the miracles of nanotechnology, with a mannered precision leavened with considerable wit. Thus, his ingenious set-piece explications of the working of nanotechnology archly echo those Edwardian scientific romances in which no visit to some steamdriven utopia or other was complete without a tour of the balloon factory and the automatic crèche.

At the heart of the novel is an affecting portrayal of the increasing sophistication of the interaction between Nell and her stolen Primer, and of the tales it tells her (through an actress who also becomes part of the tale), which are riddles that solve not only themselves, but the world. They are luminous with the joy of creation, and light Nell's story as she rises from the slums to become a pupil of a neo-Victorian academy (as ward of a crusty warrior who most surely is played by Sean Connery), to founder of a new order. *The Diamond Age*, wise and generous with both its protagonists and its readers, reinforces Stephenson's reputation as one of the strongest new voices to illuminate sf in the last decade of the century.

It has been a long time since we last heard from Alvin Maker, whose knack, in an alternative early-19th-century America where folk are gifted



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with magical abilities from dowsing to torching (the ability to foresee the multi-stranded potential futures of people), is to manipulate matter at the level of its constituent atoms (like an avatar of nanotechnology) and so perform miracles. It has been a long time since Alvin Maker turned his mind towards the shining city that might be his final destination (or fate). Five years, to be exact, while Orson Scott Card turned his mind to other sequels, and other series. But now we have the fourth volume in the Alvin Maker sequence, *Alvin Journeyman* (Tor, \$23.95), and although it has to be said it does not much advance the story of Alvin Maker's search for what might be the spiritual heart of an America in which such a hope can still shine, it does sustain the hope that this may be the best fantasy series to emerge from America since Le Guin's *Earthsea*.

Like much of Card's recent fiction, *Alvin Journeyman* deals with the rivalry between two brothers: here, Alvin and his youngest brother, Calvin. Calvin is very nearly as powerful as Alvin, but, crucially, lacks his older brother's humility, and with the resolve to undo Alvin's plans planted in his heart by Alvin's perennial foe, the Unmaker, sets off to make his own fortune. While Calvin becomes involved with Napoleon, and finally returns to America in the company of Honoré Balzac, Alvin becomes entangled with problems caused by his growing fame, and in particular by the plough of living gold which he forged as his apprentice piece.

Apart from Calvin's long circle of a journey, the book does not much stray from Alvin's home town of Hatrack River. At its centre is a long court case concerning the ownership of the golden plough, another play by the Unmaker to thwart and destroy Alvin. Card's theme is not the quest on which Alvin has set his heart, but the contrast between the moral certitudes of the two brothers. Both are imprisoned in different places, and both decide not to escape using their powers, but for very different reasons: Alvin because it would interfere with the course of justice; Calvin because of simple expediency. While Calvin meddles with history, Alvin, it is implied, is growing to be the centre of the forces which guide the fate of America.

Alvin Journeyman deepens its hero's stature with a deftly dramatized examination of the moral responsibilities of power. Card is at his best when dramatically polarizing opposing moral values, and here he is less judgmental, and ultimately more persuasive, than in the "Homecoming" series which interrupted Alvin's progress. And at the novel's end, Alvin is finally set on his course towards his city, whose foundation is

still hidden from even the knack of the torch Peggy Lerner, Alvin's protector and true love. Let us hope we do not have to wait five years to find out what happens next.

It's turtles from here on down. With *Discworld*, Terry Pratchett has invented a perfectly elastic scenario in which his flat world, balanced on the back of an elephant who stands on the back of a giant turtle, is a stage on which various alarums and excursions, entrances and exits, can take place, world, and turtles, without end. In the 18th in the series, *Maskerade* (Gollancz, £15.99), two of the best of his tremendous cast of characters, the witches Granny Weatherwax and her sidekick, Nanny Ogg, have come to the Ankh Morpork Opera House because that's where a possible replacement

member for their depleted triumvirate has run off to. They soon become involved in the mystery of what is behind the mounting number of corpses backstage, which may or may not be down to the activities of the Opera Ghost, who, when not flitting through the bowels of the opera house, or leaving calling cards engraved with *sans serif* manic laughter, gives clandestine singing lessons to an innocent performer with whom he's infatuated, who just happens to be the runaway the two witches are seeking.

The resultant series of firecracker puns, running jokes, misunderstandings and parodies, effortlessly sustained, is notable for the affectionate care which Pratchett lavishes on his characters, and a lack of malice that makes his sharply observant burlesques all the more effective (a terrific spoof of Andrew Lloyd Webber's echolalic composing technique is all the more pointed because it revolves around a sympathetically drawn *idiot savant*). The high and low comedy manages the difficult trick of appearing to be casually thrown off while disguising a steel trap of a plot that knits itself neatly up by the book's end, and leaves the world (and the turtle) whole. Until the next time, be of good cheer. **Paul J. McAuley**

The Evidence of Things Not Seen

Thomas M. Disch

"Faith," declared Paul, in his Epistle to the Hebrews, "is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." "Faith," declares Alexander Cruden, at the head of a lengthy list of biblical citations under that heading in his concordance to the Old and New Testaments, "is a dependence on the veracity of another." It could be that faith is simply an agreement to be deceived, an agreement that neither Paul's definition, nor Cruden's, necessarily contradicts.

Since one man's faith may be another's folly, it is generally considered impolite openly to question even the dottiest supernatural beliefs of one's fellow citizens. Those who entertain peculiar or millennial beliefs can usually be counted on to assemble in some congenial fastness, where they will not be embarrassed by public scrutiny unless they misbehave egregiously, as in cases like Jim Jones's cult in Guyana or the Aum Shinrikyo sect in Japan. For the most part, no one pays fringe faiths much atten-

tion, and so the generations of gurus, ascended masters, Mahdis, and other self-proclaimed Messiahs sail into the aether of religious history, shrinking to the size of footnotes and then vanishing from sight altogether.

Thanks, however, to the industry and intelligence of Peter Washington, the editor of Everyman's Library, the snow-jobs of yesteryear have been compacted into a single multi-biography, *Madame Blavatsky's Baboon* (Schocken, \$27.50; originally published in the UK by Secker & Warburg, 1993), with an irreproachable scholarly apparatus (47 pages of notes and bibliography), and, more importantly, with irresistible narrative brio. Has anyone before Washington undertaken the Augean labour of writing a coherent history of the intellectual antecedents of the New Age? Professional doubters, such as those who write for *The Skeptical Inquirer*, have their hands full controverting the absurdities of the passing moment – UFO claimants, Satanic child-abusers and spoon-bending psychics. And those who are busy tilling

New Age fields will not wish to call attention to their shabby ancestors, who were, with few exceptions, a disreputable lot in the conduct of their lives, while their immense tomes, full of bygone flummeries, do not decant well.

That is what makes *Madame Blavatsky's Baboon* such a delight for readers who look to history for a higher form of gossip. The Merchant-Ivory film team could refine half a dozen good screenplays from the ore Peter Washington provides – beginning with the raffish career of the title character, the author of *Isis Unveiled* (1875), co-founder of the Theosophical Society, and an archetypal con-artist of the sort who can't resist glorying, among her fellow grifters, in her trickster capabilities.

Helena Blavatsky regularly arranged for the Hidden Masters with whom she was in communication – Koot Hoomi, Serapis Bey, *et al* – to “precipitate” sealed letters from the immaterial aether into the pockets of her acolytes. One such missive to a wavering recruit, Colonel Henry Olcott, instructed him that Blavatsky “had a special mission in the world, and must be cared for at all costs, even if caring for her meant sacrificing the colonel's other interests, such as his wife and children.” [p 48] Olcott dumped his wife and sons and became Blavatsky's life-long patsy and her shill. After many wanderings, they pitched their tents at Adyar, in India, and established the Theosophical Society. Blavatsky thrived as a spiritualist in Anglo-Indian circles, performing conventional psychic tricks, “making a brooch appear in a flowerbed, finding a teacup and summoning music out of thin air.” Often detected in her impostures, Blavatsky loftily maintained that her seeming scamming was actually an integral part of the Hidden Masters' higher plan – which only she could apprehend. Even today she has her remnant of true believers: a review of Washington's book in the *New York Times Book Review* occasioned a reproachful letter from one such die-hard. As Washington observes, “There are those who argue still that if Blavatsky is a figure of scandal, it is only because the slanders on her reputation are signs of grace: the stigmata that all great martyrs must bear.” There is even a kind of heroism in such loyalty, as who might say, “Well, yes, he *was* crucified, but I had dinner with him yesterday.”

For Blavatsky the highest wisdom, as set forth in her books, transcended both Christianity and its then blackest *bête noir*, Darwinism. (The baboon of the title was a cherished bibelot, a stuffed “bespectacled baboon, standing upright, dressed in wing-collar, morning-coat and tie, and carrying

under its arm the manuscript of a lecture on *The Origin of Species*.”) [p 45] “It was necessary,” Washington argues, “for someone to show the way forward by denouncing both the Darwinians, who stood for false ideals of progress, and the Christians, who believe in false myths of salvation. Blavatsky's supporters argue that attacking both parties with their huge vested interests was bound to provoke a bitter response: hence the personal attacks on their idol.”

Washington spends much more of his time on the page recounting scandals than interpreting them, but in that passage he begins to suggest not only Blavatsky's appeal but that of the whole New Age mind-set. New Agers want the best of both worlds, Here and Hereafter. They want a pleasant afterlife, which requires some recourse to the miraculous, but they don't want it to be conditional upon their own good behaviour. They applaud the libertinism of the Enlightenment but deplore its irreligion. The scandal of God, as Madame Blavatsky sensed (along with her countryman, Dostoevsky), is that he can be capricious, dispensing grace to reprobates and withholding it from the righteous.

This was, then as now, a gender-specific issue. Blavatsky, simply by asserting herself as a prophet and high-priestess of a new religion, was making a feminist statement, one with which those who followed in her footsteps concurred: Annie Besant, initially an early advocate of contraception; Katherine Tingley, an American actress in the mould of Shirley Maclaine, who formed her own apostate Californian branch of Theosophy; and innumerable others, down to the legion of lady psychics, seers, tarot readers and astrologers in our own time. Women, as any woman knows, have as good a claim on Godhood and/or priesthood as men, and if this age won't acknowledge the justice of their claim, then let's have a another. Believe in the Goddess and viva Blavatsky!

But the women have not been entirely alone in their mystic fane. There was, in those days (we have reached the *fin de siècle*), a love that dared not speak its name, but was, even so, hot to trot. Enter the paedophile and psychopathic liar, Charles Webster Leadbeater, whose biopic

might more suitably be filmed by Ken Russell than Merchant-Ivory. Leadbeater's account of his own early life is, like Blavatsky's and Gurdjieff's official cv's, a parcel of succulent lies, but the life the lies were designed to camouflage was just as juicy. Paedophilia was to be, more than once, the spur to travel, both before and after his ascension to the rank of bishop in the Liberal Catholic Church, an apostate institution in which bishoprics were to be had for the asking. Liberal Catholics chiefly believed in candles, incense and well-made vestments, along with Atlantis, Mu and all that is divinely decadent. It was an enduring tradition. In the early '60s, I came upon a remnant of the creed, one Bishop Itkin, who was often noted, in the newspapers of the day, for his prominent episcopal presence at rallies of the Peace Movement. Like Leadbeater, Itkin found that if you called yourself a bishop and wore a pectoral cross you would be treated with the same deference as the genuine article, both by the media and by altar-boys. *Plus ça change....*

Leadbeater is the Mr Micawber of *Madame Blavatsky's Baboon*, a deliciously predictable reprobate and opportunist. In the course of his career he scored at least as well as Father Bruce Ritter in our own era. He was disgraced repeatedly, but he would just expatriate himself and keep on scoring. Theosophy, by shrugging off a moral code, possessed a special attraction for homosexuals who wanted to love both God and man. Now that the more liberal Protestant churches have welcomed homosexuals into the ranks of the clergy, gays of a religious bent need not venture as far afield as Theosophy to enjoy the rites and consolations of the Christian faith. Only time will tell if Theosophy is strong enough to survive that loss.

Leadbeater's penchant for ephebes leads to the next, and most amazing biopic opportunity of this history: Krishnamurti. “One evening in the spring of 1909,” Washington recounts, “Leadbeater noticed an extraordinary aura surrounding one of the Indian boys paddling in the shallows. The boy was dirty and unkempt.... The boy took his fancy, and within days Leadbeater had told his followers that this child was destined to be a great teacher...” [p 128]

The charm of the Krishnamurti story is much like that of the movie *Forrest Gump*, a fairy tale in which a simpleton, after only a little adversity, is blessed with all possible blessings because his heart is pure. Leadbeater intuited that young Krishna, known in the spirit realm as Alcyone, had lived 30 lives already, ranging in time from 22662 BC to AD 624, which Leadbeater began to chronicle in the





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pages of *The Theosophist*. "It turned out that in each of these 30 lives everyone else known to Leadbeater also figured, but with different identities and sometimes different sexes. Some had been famous historical characters. Others had lived on the moon and Venus." [p 129] Alcyone's long saga became the means by which Leadbeater revenged himself on old enemies and theosophical rivals. Thus, in an earlier life, Mrs Besant (in this life, too, a serial monogamist), "acquired twelve husbands for whom she roasted rats." Another Leadbeater scoop: Julius Caesar's marriage to Jesus Christ. The bishop could out-tabloid even the *Weekly World News*, and in this he prefigured the can-you-top-this spirituality of our own era, in which sheer imagination is confused with causality. Such fads as creative visualization, UFO abductions and incest survivalism all conflate dreams and matters of fact, and they are licensed to do so by the intellectual deference long accorded to crackpot religions.

Leadbeater's tales of his divine Alcyone soon put the teenage Krishnamurti on the theosophical map. Mrs Besant adopted "Krishna" and his sibling, Nitya, transported them to London, and put them on a new dietary regimen of porridge, eggs and milk. Leadbeater, a fanatic about good hygiene, personally attended their daily ablutions. The boys' father sued for repossession of his offspring, charging Leadbeater with "deification and sodomy." [p 134] That is only the beginning of Krishnamurti's golden legend. By the sound of it, he was rather a nice fellow, his Godhead notwithstanding – a bit like Bertie Wooster in his happy accommodation (and blindness) to his own astonishing privileges.

Three further gurus round out Washington's *dramatis personae*: George Ivanovich Gurdjieff (1873?-1949), Peter Ouspensky (1878-1947), and Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925). Gurdjieff was the most audacious of the lot, the self-appointed Svengali to several generations of mystical Trilbys. He bootstrapped himself from an impoverished childhood in Armenia to become, by 1912, the spiritual drill-master of his own small sect in Moscow. He kept his followers busy with a regimen of chanting, breathing exercises, modern dance, and character-building drudgery – a programme of summer-camp monasticism much emulated by later gurus. Submission = inner peace.

At the height of his notoriety, in 1922, Gurdjieff had established his own school-cum-commune at the Chateau du Prieure, 40 miles outside Paris. Many noted intellectuals of the era made pilgrimages to the Prieure – A. R. Orage, a prominent magazine

editor who was chiefly responsible for Gurdjieff's celebrity; D. H. Lawrence, who wasn't about to be someone else's Trilby and didn't stay long; and most famously, Katherine Mansfield, who died there after a brief sojourn, her faith in Gurdjieff not being sufficient to cure her tuberculosis. Because of its unities of space, time and action, Mansfield's few weeks of discipleship would be the best bet for a Merchant-Ivory movie. Mansfield's *liebestod* would supply the plot, and here is the

mise-en-



scène: "Society ladies who had never done a day's work would be set to peel potatoes or weed a flower border with teaspoons while learning a few Tibetan words or memorizing Morse code. Others were given complicated exercises in mental arithmetic while performing certain movements. A Harley Street doctor was deputed to light the boiler, writers cooked and chopped, and eminent psychiatrists shovelled manure or scrubbed the kitchen floor. The place had the atmosphere of a savage boarding school run by a demented if genial headmaster, and most of the pupils loved it – for a while." [p 241]

Peter Ouspensky was as drab a personage as Gurdjieff was colourful. Ouspensky's lifelong search for the miraculous began in the mists of pseudo-science, where he inferred from the mathematical possibility of time as "the fourth dimension" (the title of his first publication) the neces-

sity of a Nietzschean eternal recurrence. This brainstorm shaded by degrees into an acceptance of reincarnation, occultism and all the rest of the theosophical agenda. A visit to the Theosophical Society's HQ at Adyar only left him longing for a social environment large enough to swallow him whole. His wish – perhaps the essential impulse of a religious vocation – echoed Donne: "bend/ Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new... Take me to You, imprison me, for I/ Except you enthrall me, never shall be free/ Nor ever chaste, except You ravish me."

Ouspensky's prayers were answered when, just before World War I, he was taken before Gurdjieff and their long game of Captain-May-I began. Imprisoned, enthralled and ravished, Ouspensky became Gurdjieff's John the Baptist and general dogsbody. His daily witnessing of his master's scams and caprices only snugged the bonds of love tighter, as in *The Blue Angel*. Just as their platonically sado-masochistic romance reached a rolling boil, the Russian Revolution kicked in, and Gurdjieff's little band of disciples, along with a small tribe of gypsy relatives, became refugees, seeking escape into Turkey. They caromed about the steppes of central Asia between the contending Red and White armies, giving modern dance recitals, living on mushrooms and berries, and gathering about the campfire at night to drink the master's wisdom. It would require the budget of another *Dr Zhivago*, but the dance sequences on the battlefield could be stunning. *Le Sacré du Printemps*? George C. Scott is Gurdjieff. Gene Hackman would pass muster as Ouspensky, though, really, it's a role anyone could handle. That was Ouspensky's problem.

Rudolf Steiner – a guru only insofar as that was one of the duties he imposed on himself as a universal genius and world redeemer – was the son of Austrian peasants, and had a childhood that would have been the envy even of Wordsworth. Nature spoke to him incessantly. As he matured, he tried to translate these intimations into a theory that would controvert positivistic science, and so, with some scraps of Goethe's errant optical and biological theories and deep draughts of Kant, he began to construct his *Summa*. Then Madame Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine* blew his *Summa* out of the water. He converted to Theosophy in 1902 and became the Society's leader in German-speaking lands.

Of all Washington's leading players, Steiner was the dullest, the most conventionally respectable, and the most successful. He lived to see two cathedral-like Goetheanums built according to his own *Art-Nouveau*-like specifications (the first one, of wood,

burned down), and the system of Steiner schools is still around to offer progressive education with a theosophical flavour. Should the government ever establish a National Endowment for Occult Science, it would have to find someone like Rudolf Steiner to be its chairman.

As the chronicle approaches our own time, the roster of theosophical dabblers and day-trippers multiplies. There are index entries for Aldous Huxley, Christopher Isherwood, Bob Dylan and past leaders of the Liberal Party in England. The last of Peter Washington's gurus, Idries Shah, seems to have been sent down from on high specifically to prove there is eternal recurrence. Like Blavatsky, Shah was in touch with "an invisible hierarchy which had chosen him to transmit their wisdom to suitable individuals. He was now looking for European pupils and helpers, and for introductions to the rich and powerful whose help he needed to transform the world. To this end he had founded SUFI: the Society for Understanding Fundamental Ideas."

Shah managed to connect with one of Gurdjieff's and Ouspensky's most committed disciples, Captain J. G. Bennett, who was persuaded in the 1960s to turn over a valuable English estate at Coombe Springs, which had served for many years as another Gurdjieffian Priore. When the other trustees of the estate balked, "Shah was adamant: there must be an outright gift or nothing at all. Bennett tried to negotiate, but the more conciliatory his behaviour, the more outrageous Shah's demands became. The new teacher wanted to know how Bennett could have the nerve to negotiate with the Absolute." Once the Absolute had got his way, "Shah's first act was to eject Bennett and the old pupils from their own house, banning them from the place except by his specific permission. His second act was to sell the property to developers for £100,000 in the following year, buying a manor house at Langton Green near Tunbridge Wells in Kent with the proceeds."

Why do they do it? Why do fools fall in love – and believers believe, even as they're being fleeced? I think it is Pascal's wager applied to the economic realm. Just as gamblers gamble from a secret desire to know the terrors and ecstasies of utter ruin, so believers need to immolate themselves upon the altars of the Absolute in order to prove themselves worthy of the sacrificial fires. The experience may only last for a little while, but the thrill must be exquisite. For those who prefer to experience that thrill vicariously, *Madame Blavatsky's Baboon* gets you close enough to smell the singed hair.

Thomas M. Disch

BOOKS



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I Am Woman, Hear Me Kick Butt

James Lovegrove

R*Rose Madder* (Hodder & Stoughton, £16.99) might be regarded as the third in a trilogy of "spousal abuse" novels by Stephen King, the first two being *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne*. Shorter, more intimate and with a narrower focus than King's usual 600-page plus behemoths, these three books take the theme of men using their positions of authority and superior physical strength to belittle and harm their wives and then show how the wives fight back, using guile and cunning instead of brute force. Men are King's new monsters, not vampires, not rabid St Bernards, not haunted cars, not mad axe-wielding ex-nurses; men who bully, torment, beat and despise the so-called weaker sex because they can do it and because, thanks to centuries of tacit approval of this kind of behaviour, they can get away with it.

Rosie Daniels is married to a beast of a human being called Norman. When we first see her she is crouched in the corner of their living room in the throes of a miscarriage brought on by her husband's fists. He is in the kitchen washing his hands and humming "When a Man Loves a Woman." It's a shocking, hideous moment, the proverbial punch in the gut that softens the reader up for what follows.

After 14 years of this kind of treatment, Rosie finally snaps and, scarcely able to believe what she is doing, leaves home. She heads off to an unnamed city, starts a new life, stumbles into a well-paid job, finds a genuinely good man to love – the only problem is, Norman, as well as being a vicious bastard, is a cop. He's trained to track people down. So, no matter how well Rosie tries to hide her trail, sooner or later he's going to catch up with her, and then he's not going to plead with her to come back to him; he's going to make sure she never goes home to anyone ever again...

Unlike *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores*

Claiborne, in which the supernatural events are pushed so far into the background as to be almost undetectable, in *Rose Madder* King embraces the story's fantastical elements with total inhibition. Shortly after arriving in the city Rosie comes across a painting in a pawnshop that, when hung on the wall in her apartment, transforms into a gateway into a mythical world of female power. There, she learns all that is magical and terrifying about womanhood, and there, too, resides her only hope of defeating Norman. "Rose Madder" is not just the name of an artist's pigment; it becomes the name of the goddess-like being depicted in the painting and also an emblem of the ascendance of Rosie's darker side.

Had this been a book written by a woman, it would be easy to dismiss it as a wish-fulfilment fantasy of female empowerment, *Thelma and Louise* meets *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*. Since it has been written by a man, his motives deserve scrutiny. King has been accused of an inability to flesh out believable female characters. With *Rose Madder* and its two thematic predecessors, did he set himself the challenge of responding to that criticism? Or perhaps, given the Pro-Choice sub-plot in *Insomnia*, women's issues have become his foremost concern, the way the secret machinations of government used to be. Each, in its way, concerns the abuse of power, after all.

The sad fact is that *Rose Madder*, for all its undoubted worthiness, is suspenseless and dull. The novel only really sings when we see things from Norman's point of view. His racist, profane interior monologue is filled with the King *bon mots* we know and love, and his savage misogyny is far more credible than the bitter-edged saintliness of the women at the refuge where Rosie first finds sanctuary after arriving in the city. Perhaps the awful truth is that we would prefer to read (and write) about monsters rather than saints, and that, as Milton discovered with Satan, an author can't help giving his devils all the best lines.

King must at least be admired for trying to push the envelope of his talent when it would be all too easy for an author in his exalted position to turn out one *Needful Things* after another. After all, there's no absence of novelists willing to step into the royal size-elevens should he choose to vacate them for good. One such novelist would seem to be Robert Gleason, whose *Wrath of God* (HarperPrism, \$14.99) openly declares itself on its front cover as "The Greatest Apocalyptic Thriller Since *The Stand*." Since the book opens with an old white-haired woman sitting in a rocking chair, one immediately assumes



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this piece of publisher puffery to mean, "Liked *The Stand*? Well, Here It Is Again!"

As ever, comparisons are odious. *Wrath of God* is part war novel, part cowboy novel, part sf fantasy, and a rollicking, riotous good read that devoured this reviewer in one sitting. Its scope isn't so much epic as panoramic. After a nuclear holocaust, the denizens of the Citadel, last outpost of American civilization, find themselves facing the threat of a reincarnated Tamburlaine the Great (spelt Tamerlane in the novel) and his horde of European and Asian dog-soldiers who have raped and pillaged their way across several continents and now have their sights set on adding the erstwhile home of hamburgers and Elvis to the list of their conquests. The questions isn't so much if the good guys, hopelessly outnumbered and outgunned, will prevail against overwhelming odds, but how.

And what a how it turns out to be. Via a combination of nuclear physics and Red Indian shamanic magic, three all-American heroes are brought forward through time to muster and lead the resistance against Tamerlane. They are General Patton, Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson and Amelia Earhart. Oh yes, and there's a baby Triceratops too. Not to mention some range-riding cowhands. And a division of home-made armoured cars like something out of *Mad Max*. And, I think, a kitchen sink as well.

Gleason writes evocatively pared-

down prose. The plot surges along like water through a storm drain. The roses are not sniffed along the way. *Wrath of God* is terrific fun, and worth hunting down at your local import bookshop.

Also worth hunting down is *Tombs* (White Wolf/Borealis, \$19.99), an anthology of short fiction edited by Peter Crowther and Edward Kramer which, given the preponderance of British authors involved, merits UK publication on those grounds alone.

The theme of *Tombs* is – you guessed it – cemeteries and graveyards, vaults and sarcophagi, mausoleums and sacred soil, last resting places and the homes of the unquiet undead, but the editors have culled such a diversity of stories that at no point does the reader become claustrophobically enclosed by the subject matter and feel the urge, like the narrator of "The Premature Burial," to scream out loud. The theme has been loosely interpreted by some of the authors, such as Ian Watson and Ian McDonald, whose "tombs" are, in a sense, self-imposed states of exile:

McDonald's fairy fantasy, "The Time Garden," forms the backbone of the anthology and is a loving and gorgeously written paean of praise to the family, while Watson's "The Amber Room" is a clever, enigmatic dissection of obsession and the expiation of sin. Michael Moorcock adds yet another layer to his limitlessly evolving mythos with an Elric story – or is it a Von Bek story? (It may not be either.) Jeremy Dyson does Christopher Fowler's usual job with a tale of urban paranoia set on the London Underground (if you've ever been in a Tube train that's stuck between stations and the lights have gone out, you'll know how like a tomb that can feel), while Fowler himself serves up a humorously satirical slice of nastiness set in a Gormenghast-ly castle. Michael Bishop's "Epistrophe" is a short, sweet toot on a solo saxophone in an empty alleyway, and Storm Constantine rounds off the book with a characteristically elaborate and erotic coda.

There's a poem from Neil Gaiman, an info-burst of techno-thriller fiction from Larry Bond and Chris Carlson that sits strangely well alongside all the filigreed dark fantasy, and offerings also from Ben Bova, Nancy Collins, Stephen Gallagher, Colin Greenland and Lisa Tuttle, to name but five. Cap this with a deliriously loopy introduction from the possibly legendary Forrest Ackerman, and you have an effective and eclectic collection that's well worth burying yourself in.

James Lovegrove

I am one of the diminishing band who can claim to have known Michael Moorcock before he was famous, as 'twere. In my teens I read the first Elric stories as they appeared in *Science Fantasy* – to my great delight, being the right age. But one tends to grow away from the companions of youth, and it seemed to me that in the latter 1960s and 70s Moorcock wrote too much, with too little revision and with too little new to say.

He was also working on the theme of the Eternal Champion, a character whose recurrence resembles that of Manuel of Poictesme, and whose adventures seem to indicate a similar moral: that security of domestic bliss is ultimately preferable both to the bizarre and heady glammers of the marvellous, the magical and the forbidden, and to the exercise of power. Neither author cheats the reader, as plenty of all four are zestfully presented before their ultimate rejection, but this said, the comparison favoured Cabell: beside his, Moorcock's universe was crudely constructed, the balance between the arbitrary and the thematic swung unguided by formal constraints or scholarly frameworks; and (in the Cornelius books espe-

Visions of London and Elsewhere

Chris Gilmore

cially) Moorcock himself seemed overly responsive to popular fashion.

I therefore came upon *Von Bek* (Millennium, £5.99) with the advantage of old acquaintance but no current background, which may well be the best state. Millennium is bringing out a set of newly edited omnibuses (open-ended, but 15 published so far) which covers the multiple incarnations of the Champion from Corum to the End of Time. Whether it will also make sense of the lot is open to doubt; Moorcock can look back on over 30 years of continuous publication since his first cheque from John Carnell, and his vision may well have evolved past the most vertiginous feats of edi-

torial hindsight. To unify *The War Hound and the World's Pain* (1981) and *The City in the Autumn Stars* (1985) with the vulgar and self-indulgent short story "The Pleasure Garden of Felipe Sagittarius" (1965) in this volume would be daunting enough, without considering the relationship between Elric of Melniboné and Jherek Carnelian.

War Hound is essentially a character study, containing much conversation but little action till the last quarter. The mercenary captain Ulrich von Bek, hard of head and made harder of heart by his experiences in the Thirty Years War, stumbles upon an enchanted castle where he meets in quick succession love and Lucifer. Lucifer sends him on a Grail quest (arranged much like a treasure hunt) through the Mittelmark, a series of magical realms on the borderlands of the world we know, which affords him the opportunity to meet many interesting people and engage in much metaphysical reflection. Elric's world was dominated by the struggle between Law and Chaos, von Bek's by the conflicting claims of the rational and the miraculous. All right, it's as simple in matter as con-



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struction, but I enjoyed Moorcock's skill in delineating his character through his voice.

Von Bek is a man plagued by doubt and uncertainty, and with a soldier's eye for detail. He thinks and speaks in a spare, highly controlled style with few contractions, reminiscent of Jack Vance at his darkest and well suited to the discussion and the description of moral and physical horror. (There's also a variant on a joke that Vance had already used twice that I know of, proving parallelism of great minds.) The purist will find the ending a tad sentimental, but there's nothing contrived about it.

City concerns the equally picaresque adventures of Manfred von Bek, a worthy descendant of Ulrich but in character more reminiscent of G. M. Fraser's Flashman than anyone else. He even has a troublesome conscience, though he lacks Flashy's conspicuous whiskers and equally conspicuous but less convincing pretensions to cowardice. Living in France during the revolution, he finds himself as disenfranchised with democracy as was Ulrich with faith, and escapes just before his lack of commitment brings him to the guillotine.

There follow sundry escapes, fights and an encounter with Libussa, a mysterious beauty, before Manfred fetches up in the agreeable city of Mirenborg in the company of Le Chevalier St Odhran, a Scottish balloonist and mountebank. Together they set about a grandiose fraud, only to be interrupted by Klosterheim, an agent of what one might term the Bennite faction in Hell – those devils who reckon Lucifer has gone soft on the pure principle of "Evil, be thou my good!" and distrust his contemplated *rapprochement* with God. (I commend this book to Tony Blair.)

Through the manipulations of Klosterheim all the major characters find themselves at the hub of the Mit-telmark, in the city of the title (which perhaps inevitably resembles Malacia, Viriconium, Paradys etc.), in search of the Grail which has gone missing again. There the final round of pursuit, conflict and revelation takes place, leading to a prolonged, bloody and moralistic climax dedicated to the proposition that good ends must not be sought by bad means. It's a simple enough story, and one might feel a trifle short-changed that Moorcock should tell it twice at such length between the same covers, but in fact one reads both books for the ornamentation, which is lavish and colourful enough for anyone and sufficiently varied in tone to highlight the differences between the protagonists. And if Moorcock doesn't quite meet the standards of Vance and Cabell, he's nonetheless produced a very superior entertainment by the literary standards of his time.

Those may not be the highest, but his technical standards are worse than patchy. If you want to mention the Prince Regent, it's worth noting that his regency began in 1811, not 1793; and if you have any pretensions as a stylist, you don't descend into the bureaucratic passive without good reason, or confuse the archaic first- and third-person tenses. It irks me mightily when a man of Moorcock's undisputed talent so disregards what is allegedly a re-edited book as to let such howlers creep in a second time. Moorcock claims and deserves a position high in the second division of 20th-century stylists, but if even he isn't prepared to expend a couple of days's effort in its support, what price the future?

Enough! I commend this book to A. N. Wilson.

After *City* Moorcock wrote *Blood*, which also mentions the name of von Bek (or Van Beek). It left Dave Kendall "unsatisfied" in *Interzone* 92 and I concur; Moorcock had set himself the impossible task of realizing a meaningful narrative in a universe without effective causal relationships, but as it ends with the establishment of his own wish-fulfilment world, where his new set of short stories, *Fabulous Harbours* (Millennium, £15.99) is set, the enthusiast will want to read it first.

Fabulous Harbours is lightly framed as the reminiscences of some of his earlier characters, but as is often the case, the milieu is the principal focus of interest. Moorcock's ideal world is not a utopia, but one where historical changes have favoured the glamorous and the gracious against the squalid and the utilitarian. It's far more extensive than John Major's England of "warm beer, cricket on the village green and spinsters cycling to even-song," but wholly consistent with it and just as sentimental – indeed, Major's belongs there as a subset. Nowhere are the strengths and weaknesses of this approach better demonstrated than in "Lunching with the AntiChrist," an account of the life of a slightly dotty Christian socialist/anarchist living as a remittance-man in the decaying splendour of a late Victorian square in 60s London. Moorcock fairly wallows in nostalgia for the iron lace, the gingerbread, the hand-made bricks and so forth, not to mention *The*

Brains Trust, *Reynolds News* and the Beatles, but to chide him for self-indulgence would be to miss the point.

The trouble is that while a huge array of icons is invoked, almost nothing is described. This extends even to the cuisine: we're told that the old man prepares and serves "mysterious sauces whose nuances I can still recall, wines of exquisite delicacy, a dessert which contained an entire orchestra of flavours," but not a single dish is even named. This is really the problem with the entire book – too much invocation and not enough description, so that wherever you fail to share Moorcock's precise cultural background you find the name forced to do service for the image, and often enough an abstraction for the name. The more I read it, the more I felt that I was eavesdropping on a prolonged essay in self-definition, undertaken by the author strictly for his own benefit.

At least that exercise has a purpose. Elsewhere the original conceit of the *Eternal Champion* seems to have receded from his mind, leaving only a residual archness. That a character should develop through successive incarnations, with different avatars emphasizing different aspects, is fair enough; but often the same name will be attached to people with nothing else in common, suggesting that the author was too lazy to think of a new one. Moorcock toys with Elric (who gets sucked into an adventure of Renard von Bek's), and with a sub-Sherlockian clubland-hero spoof, and with a Hank Janson parody, and with his iterative symbol of the hermaphrodite (whom I simply cannot take seriously, having seen him/her perform in a dive on the Moss Side called the Gamecock [nudge-nudge] in 1980).

The overwhelming impression is of self-boredom unconvincingly disguised as self-satisfaction. I've encountered plenty of written-out authors, but Moorcock seems more to have written himself into a corner. Why else should he set out to write badly in borrowed styles rather than well in his own? I'd like to proffer an escape, one ideally suited to his scholarship, his Englishry and his taste for the flamboyant no less than the odd and obscure. Wren's plans to rebuild the City after the Great Fire were never realized, but they are still extant (the Society of Antiquaries has a gorgeous example). Suppose they had been completed, and suppose for good measure there had been no Glorious Revolution. Think what fun Moorcock could have thinking up suitable names for the piazzas and thoroughfares of this London-that-never-was and peopling the court of James III & VIII (aka the Old Pretender) and the dissolute Prince of Wales (aka Bonny Prince Charlie) – using, of course, plenty of historical characters but no names found any-



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where else in his *oeuvre*. I'd like to see Moorcock take up this idea because I reckon he needs an outlet for his talents, but if he can't be bothered – it's free to the first comer.

Whoever (if anyone) realizes that vision of London, Tanith Lee has her own. *Heart Beast* and *Elephantism* were more rural, but *Reigning Cats and Dogs* (Headline, £16.99) is set in the same hyper-Victorian world. Lee's novel is written in overt homage to Dickens, but just as her (unnamed) City is hyper-Victorian, so her writing is hyper-Dickensian. He can offer Nancy, but Grace, Lee's female lead, isn't just a golden-hearted whore but a saintly healer; Miss Havisham is a notable reclusive grotesque, but Lee offers seven, far from reclusive, female hysterics in decaying bridal garb, who shamelessly flaunt their misery throughout the city (and gain scant sympathy thereby). Nothing in Dickens could be more sordid than her scenes where lowlife characters scavenge in sewers and on the foreshore, nothing more sumptuous than the boy brothel where Saul, her principal male character, passes his formative years (being raped for the first time at nine by a paederast specially chosen for his unusually small penis). Whitechapel was dirty and dangerous enough, but wait till you see Black Church.

Altogether, this book is a literary romp, though predictably somewhat violet-hued as romps go, and I only wish I could send it back in time to comfort its spiritual progenitor on his deathbed. I'm sure he'd appreciate such jokes as this:

These daughters were noted for their names, for long ago Mason, who could read, had found bits of a dictionary, the words clear but all the meanings muddled and illegible. Taken was Mason however, with the looks and sounds. So now they were beside him, Calamine and Hyena. There had been a Eureka, too, but an infant malady had claimed her, she was lost.

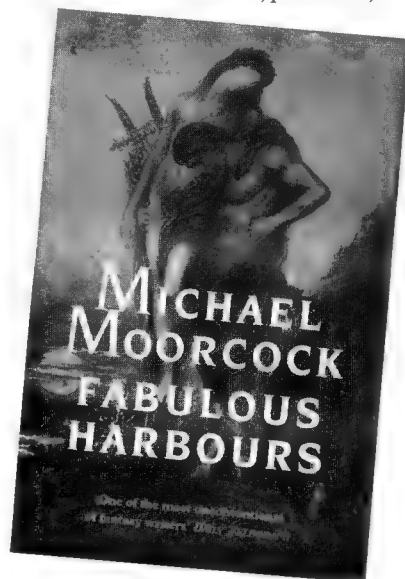
I'm less sure he'd approve of the story, which takes an un-Christian view of the supernatural. Saul proves to be the hereditary leader of a club dedicated to the Victorian ideal of improving society, though its highly placed members use unorthodox methods. Taking Anubis as their symbol, they each murder at least one bad hat per quarter (from the most unselfish motives, of course), but so much bloodshed has awakened (or created) a bloodthirsty spirit in Anubis's own form which kills in a far more macabre fashion, and with much less discrimination, than they. Meanwhile a mysterious statue of Pasht the cat goddess has been found, and Grace has adopted a cat of patriotic beauty to match her own.

All looks set for a grand confronta-

tion, but at this point the book rather falls apart. Grace and Saul meet, they even dance, but both characters are too passive for much to come of the interaction. Instead Grace shacks up with a detective and Saul goes on an opium jag. As if in desperation the supernatural powers start without them, waging a grand conflict that extends from Black Church to Heaven and Hell, but it doesn't seem to have a lot of purpose. The writing gets uncharacteristically slack, with passages like this:

The crack that bisected the sky was more significant. It showed white, and purple veins shot off from it. Through from space itself dashed diamond galaxies. They flowered down to the place beneath, columns of bright water, heavy as stones.

Maybe "flowered" is a typo for flowed; maybe not. It doesn't matter, because, *pace* Lee,



none of it signifies anything.

It's a pity, because the characters are vivid, even if they're well over the top, and so are many of the individual scenes. But they don't add up to anything much, and in consequence the happy ending looks arbitrary and tacked-on. Aho! Better luck next time.

Ian McDonald is an extremely *au fait* writer, which can make one self-conscious. Embedded in his latest novel, *Chaga* (Gollancz, £16.99; published in America as *Evolution's Shore*, Bantam, \$12.95), are innumerable references

(some acknowledged, some not) to *inter alia*, *The War of the Worlds*, *Dirty Harry*, *The Illustrated Man*, *Gone with the Wind* and *Out of Africa*. Heaven knows how many more I missed, but entering into the spirit of the thing, I spotted strong echoes of *Solaris*, *Hot-house*, *The Crystal World* and *Quatermass and the Pit*, plus a joke lifted bodily from *The Alexandria Quartet*.

It's 2008, and something is amiss with the Solar System; Hyperion has disappeared in a high-energy flash, the white side of Japetus has turned dark, and novel forms of life, carbon-based but definitely not as we know it, have taken up residence at sundry equatorial locations including Chaga in Kenya (after which they and the book are named), and are spreading implacably. They constitute a coherent, self-contained ecosystem, so that it looks very much as if Earth is being terraformed into someone else's *terra*, but as no one has the least idea how to stop it the concern of Gaby McAslan, McDonald's female lead, is to become the world's premier commentator on its own transmogrification. In the process her personality hardens (for which she pays a bitter price later), and her public style comes more and more to resemble Kate Adie's.

As one expects of McDonald, Gaby is carefully and engagingly drawn against a sensuous and convincing background. Also as expected, his plot mechanisms are a trifle slapdash, but this is forgivable. If Gaby is to be in the right place at the right time, in the teeth of stiff professional competition, she needs luck as well as pluck. She has other needs as well, which McDonald satisfies by means of a rather laboured romantic sub-plot, including a love-scene between allegedly educated people where the woman asks the man his star sign and he *tells her*. Aho! Most love scenes are risible or distasteful, and risible is better. They detract only slightly from the book's principal virtue as a character study.

More interesting is the second sub-plot about Gaby's investigation of a secret and probably illegal project which UNECTA, the UN agency in charge, is pursuing under cover of the general chaos. It involves HIV 4 (a new and more virulent form of AIDS) plus something mysterious which has presumably been found in the Chaga, plus a number of people who have been "disappeared," presumably against their will. Can Gaby expose it without getting killed? If so, should she?

Though the Kenyan sense of place hasn't quite the impact of McDonald's writing about Ireland in *King of Morning*, *Queen of Day*, Chaga works extremely well as hard sf and as a near-future thriller; and for anyone who cares to identify and follow up all his references, it offers the key to a superior course in popular and media studies as well. **Chris Gilmore**



REVIEWED

Trekkery

Neil Jones

After commercial success with his "TekWar" series, William Shatner has now tried his hand at a *Star Trek* novel, *The Ashes of Eden* (Pocket, £9.99), apparently the first of a trilogy. The cover boldly announces "a novel by William Shatner," although the book is actually a collaboration with husband-and-wife team, Garfield and Judith Reeves-Stevens. We are not told how much inspiration or perspiration Shatner provided, and this raises doubts about the book at the outset. Clearly Shatner's name had the greater pulling power, but surely the Reeves-Stevens deserved proper billing, rather than being tucked away inside? Shatner's domination of the cover is mirrored by Kirk's of the story itself. *Ashes*, (naturally) a classic Trek story, is also very much a Captain Kirk adventure: Spock and McCoy get essentially walk-on parts, their roles there to counterpoint the Kirk-driven plotline – which takes place between movies, with Jim Kirk poised between his final days as a Starfleet captain (*The Undiscovered Country*) and his last hurrah (fast-forwarded through the next century to link him with Captain Picard of the *Next Generation* in *Generations*).

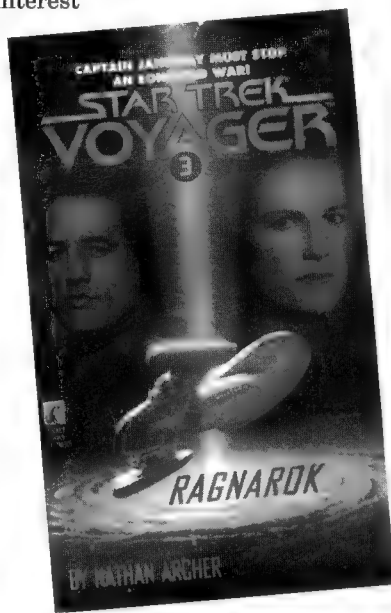
The story has a couple of familiar ingredients. First, there's a McGuffin – a mysterious planetful of Klingon-Romulans, one of whom, young and beautiful, provides Kirk's lust interest. The K-Rs are the hybrid remnants of a colony set up by the Federation's two biggest enemies – the Klingons and the Romulans – back when they were allies. Forced to fit into the interstices of the considerable Trek background, they are never either credible or interesting.

Then there's the black-hat baddie, who is, would-you-believe, the latest supreme commander of Starfleet, Admiral Androvor Drake, sworn in after the previous incumbent was nabbed conspiring to start an interstellar war. As well as being a secret member of that same conspiracy, Drake just happens to have a history with Kirk that stretches back to their time as ensigns together. His grudge against Kirk (unless I've missed something) is on general principles (Kirk too big for his boots, etc) rather than for anything nasty Kirk ever did to him. But it's enough to drive him to the reassuring black-hat tactic of remaining totally Machiavellian right the way through the book until he has the universe and Kirk at his mercy and then throwing away an unassailable position because he loses his cool with Kirk. The universe is a safer place with bad-guys like Drake around.

The story also deals with Kirk's attempt not to be his age (and good luck to him), and since the characterization is well handled, including a shrewd interweaving of the pivotal events in the great man's career, both film and TV, there's enough to make the book

readable, even enjoyable. Plus, if you've seen the film *Generations* in which Captain Kirk meets his end, there's an intriguing final (?) chapter...

It's difficult to be entirely objective about *All Good Things...* (Pocket, £4.50) by Michael Jan Friedman because it's the novelization of the final double episode of the TV series – which was one of a handful of series classics. This book certainly isn't that, but it is of more than usual interest



because, while it sets out to faithfully regurgitate the episode's plotline, it also incorporates several scenes that never made it to the screen. Drafts of the TV version were frantically changed right up to shooting, and so the book shows some (but not all) of the things that might have made it but didn't, to the frustration of both writers and actors. Co-scripter Ron Moore himself recommends the book to those interested in those missing lost scenes – and I can too.

For those who haven't seen it (and read this book only if you have), Jean-Luc Picard finds himself time-shifting

(in mind but not body) between three eras: his past, to when he first took command of the *Enterprise* at the time of the very first episode seven years previously; his present; and 25 years in the future. Superbeing Q is at the heart of the mystery, but it is Picard who has to solve it and simultaneously (if that's anything like the right word) take three versions of the *Enterprise* into the heart of a temporal anomaly. In the past he can draw on Tasha Yar, O'Brien, and a comparatively unsophisticated Data. In the future (or at least this one might-come-to-be future) he has his ex-wife, Beverly, Professor Data of Cambridge, successful novelist and visorless Geordie, and Admiral Ryker and Klingon official Worf, bitterly at odds with each other since the death of Deanna Troi. Just to make things difficult for Picard, he himself is suffering from an Alzheimer-type disease. While paying homage to the pilot episode, the final one showed how very far the series had come from those painfully awkward early episodes, and the very last scene (at least for those who have become devotees of the series and the characters) is perfect. The book comes with lots of (black-and-white) photos, too.

The novelization of *Generations* is another matter. First, that film, although way better than a certain *Interzone* film critic led you to believe, is just not in the same league as the final episode of the TV series. Still, *Generations* (Pocket, £9.99) by J.M. Dillard does what novelizations do, retell the story with doglike faithfulness and embellish it along the way. Plus there are photos (colour this time) and an interesting article on the making of the film (by those ubiquitous Reeves-Stevens).

More or less ditto for *Caretaker* by L. A. Graf (Pocket, £4.50), the novelization of the pilot episode of the new series, *Star Trek: Voyager*. It has to struggle with a less than satisfactory plot but, like its television progenitor, it's mainly there to introduce its set of brand-new characters, Captain Janeway and crew, and their situation, boldly stuck in the Delta Quadrant, forced to warp their weekly way homewards. (See my review in *Interzone* 99.)

Now, one utter turkey, *Ragnarok* by Nathan Archer (Pocket, £4.50) the third in the *Voyager* series. Our little lost starship, *Voyager*, passes by two fleets of starships that have been fighting one titanic space battle for hundreds of years. Yes, same battle, hundreds of years. Intriguing? Unfortunately, this is never made even faintly believable, plus the crew are impersonated by woodentops. Given a "Thou shalt not interfere" commandment known as the Prime Directive plus a vessel not functioning at anything like full capacity and with the



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Other Countries, Other Planets

Nigel Brown

nearest back-up 70-odd years away, what's a sensible Starfleet commander to do? Why, first send a shuttle craft into the heart of the battle to negotiate a peace treaty, despite the fact that her trusty native guide, Neelix, has warned her that the closest either side has ever shown to reasonableness is extreme paranoia. Then, when the shuttle gets into trouble, why not get *Voyager* trapped inside the battle and threatened with destruction. As well as the crew playing way under par, the two guest alien races are a lot, lot thinner than the paper they're printed on.

Apart from the absurd premise of the eternal battle (which on the rationale offered here would have lasted hours, absolute tops) this is a classic version of the idiot-plot – i.e. it works fine provided the protagonists are idiots. One to stay very well away from.

Finally, there's a new, improved version of *The Star Trek: Next Generation Companion* by Larry Nemecek (Pocket, £12.99). While the original (see my review in *Interzone* 72) only covered the first five *TNG* seasons, this has been expanded to cover all seven, plus the feature film, *Generations*. This is very much a supporter's guide, but Nemecek does venture the occasional criticism where it's absolutely necessary. He supplies a plot summary, production details, and some often intriguing notes on each episode. As the book is (presumably) Paramount-approved, it can, unlike its rivals, boast a wealth of impressive photos, a considerable plus. And overall it's the best choice as series guide.

What is both surprising (and irritating), though, is how half-hearted Nemecek's updating has been. There is no new introduction for this edition, just the original from 1992, and the lengthy Acknowledgments section appears to be identical. Some errors have been corrected (for example, a photograph of the Borgified Picard, reversed in the earlier version, is printed correctly); and some have not (wrongly identified Klingons on page 119 – especially infuriating as my earlier review pointed it out, but then who reads reviews anyway?). Some rewriting of the earlier text takes account of the way the final two seasons' episodes connected to the earlier ones, but there are also some very careless omissions. To give just one example, the original notes on "Elementary, Dear Data" (stating there will probably never be a sequel for legal reasons) stand, while the notes on "Ship in a Bottle," the eventual follow-up (!), explain how the hurdle was overcome. A couple of years from now, when the next film comes out, probably there will be a *TNG Companion, Mark 3*; and when you're getting it ready for the printers, Mr Nemecek, please take the trouble to put all the little things right.

Neil Jones

An anthology from Canada's science-fiction and fantasy magazine *On Spec* is a welcome opportunity to sample stories from that country. *On Spec: The First Five Years* (Tesseract Books, \$7.95) is an attractive paperback, printed on high-quality paper with a striking 1950s-type cover – a maple-leaf-embled spaceship soaring over an updated Chesley Bonestell lunar landscape. The contents page reveals no familiar names, and so each piece therein is a leap into the unknown for the reader of the major sf magazines. This is a bonus. It offers the chance to try new writers that have (presumably) passed muster.

The collection contains 20 stories and two poems. The average length of each story is only ten pages, with several at five pages or less. This means that the writers are setting themselves a harder task than perhaps necessary, as short(ish) fiction is tough to write well, and perilously easy for the amateur to write badly. Despite the fresh tone of this book, Canada's contribution to sf stretches back to the classic *A Strange Manuscript Found in A Copper Cylinder* by James De Mille (1888). Although Canadians such as A. E. van Vogt have had proven success outside their country, in the late 1980s a group of frustrated Canadian sf writers suffered rejections with the stories they sent to the British and U.S. markets. They decided it was better to light a candle than curse the darkness, and started *On Spec*, an English-language speculative-fiction magazine of their

own. At the time there were already two French-Canadian periodicals, *Solaris* and *Imagine*, but nothing in English except the occasional *Tesseract* anthology. To quote from the introduction, "Obviously, something was different about the type of SF being written in Canada, even if it was hard to define." This is a risky statement, as it lays them open to charges of vanity-publishing and calls into question the quality of the stories on offer. Blaming a "national something" for failure to publish abroad is suspect: I don't care if a story has been written in New York or Bognor Regis. Good fiction travels well, especially if it's in the sf genre where novel cultural settings can be integral to the story. But luckily I read the stories before the introduction.

This volume contains several stunners, some of the merely "good," and no more duds than I'd expect to find in any anthology I've ever read. To start with the award-winners ... each year the designated Canadian sf convention hosts the Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy Achievement Awards, first known as the "Caspers," but then retitled the "Auroras" to avoid association with a certain Friendly Ghost. The book features three winners. One of these is the 1994 winner, "Just Like Old Times" by Robert J. Sawyer. A serial killer is sentenced to live a brutal, short life helplessly lodged in the mind of a Tyrannosaurus rex. The clarity and vividness of the writing makes for an enjoyable, fast-paced tale. The 1991 Aurora winner is "Muffin Explains Teleology to the World at Large" by James Alan Gardner. Beginning a story with a joke is a sly way of gaining attention, and this logical exposition of a six-year-old's world is finely crafted, with a satisfying conclusion. A precocious child works well as the authority-figure in sf (remember Pee-wee in Heinlein's *Have Space-Suit—Will Travel?*). The reader can be led into the strange world of the child where, in an sf story, the child's imagination can be given full rein and their sense of wonder can be experienced for "real."

Two of the best stories in this collection are written by the same author, Jason Kapalka. I was pleasantly surprised to discover this, having picked out these two stories as my favourites before I paid much attention to who wrote them. The contributor notes don't mention any other stories published by Mr Kapalka, and so *On Spec* may lay claim to the discovery of a major new talent. At only five pages, "Frosty" is one of the shortest stories in the collection, yet the horror of it sticks in the mind long after it's been read. The simple, unoriginal idea of a snowman who comes to life plays against Raymond Briggs's *The Snowman* to give itself extra resonance beyond the page. The

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gem of the collection is Kapalka's "The True and Sad Story of Lena the Scream-Cleaner." Take a premise: screams are a finite resource that require conservation and re-cycling. Explore this to its dreadful conclusion, and write it with a clear and flawless technique (even the title is Cordwainer Smith), and you have the reason why I for one will look out for the Kapalka name in the genre.

"Why I Hunt Flying Saucers" by Hugh A. D. Spencer was the story that I most wanted to read. Scanning the book, I'd read the first two lines that, without giving them away, hooked me at once. Despite the ignorance of the Great Unwashed, "flying saucers" figure so little in written sf that, far from being a cliché, if handled well they're almost a novelty. This story rings with Sheekley-type humour with an underlying horror that never lets you forget the sincerity of UFO "contactees." It also explores various theories about Close Encounters along the way – the last time I saw this type of story done so well was Lewis Shiner's "Nine Hard Questions About the Nature of the Universe" (1983).

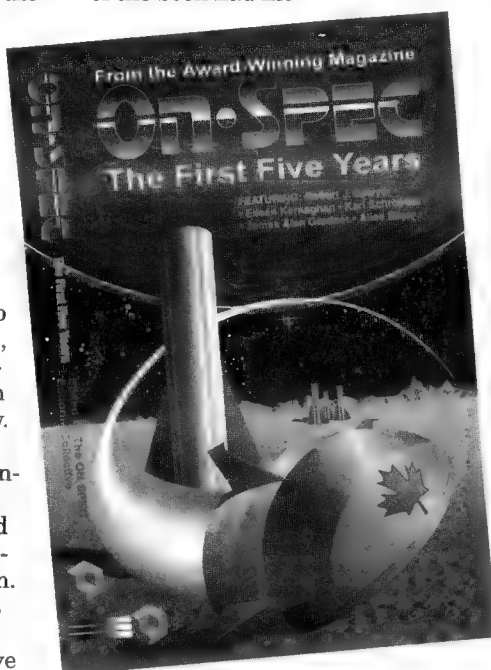
Among other stories worthy of a mention is "Kissing Hitler" by Erik Jon Spigel. If you were a 27th-century teenager who accepted a bet to travel back in time to literally kiss Hitler, and you were Jewish, and you had no idea how the Nazis would react to that ... it's an irresistible premise, and the story raises serious questions about the ignorance of truth that the passing centuries bestow. On the downside (why is there always one?) I counted eight downbeat stories that could have been better and six stories that seemed pointless or obscure or which simply failed the "So What?" question.

I've concentrated on the stories that make this anthology worth buying... all tales that should have been acceptable to all discerning markets no matter what their country of origin. Their main quality is that element without which they'd be worth nothing at all: they all entertain.

The introduction to *Rutherford's Dreams: A New Zealand Science Fiction Collection* edited by Warwick Bennett and Patrick Hudson (IPL Books, £10) admits some real eye-openers: "popular writing (in New Zealand) is not a viable option, while the literary genre, fuelled by writing and publishing grants, dominates the scene... New Zealand writers cannot afford such luxuries (to write what their readers want... What is writing for in the first place: to pass quiet afternoons, to communicate ideas or some more *recherché* purpose?"

Oh dear. If I'd read all this in a shop deciding whether to buy this book, I'd

certainly be put off. Heinlein remembered that he was competing for the reader's beer money, but even writers of "literature" must concede some populist aspirations if they're to reach a wider audience. I took some comfort from the blurb on the back of the book, with its promise that it will "delight all those who enjoy science fiction" (despite a suspicion that the publisher added this in a desperate attempt to offset the introduction). The title story of the book had me



wondering if it was non-fiction – a scientific biography of Ernest Rutherford. Mike Johnson's dry-thought-readable style had me turning pages despite myself, and by the end I knew that here was a triumph: a true sf story in its purest form, about a real scientist, his contribution to physics, its implications, and the belief-system of the man himself. The wonderful thing about this tale is that almost nothing is made up, yet in the end the tiniest twist explodes the story beyond science fact into fiction.

Phillip Mann has two stories in this book. One of them, "Lux in Tenebris," is a cautionary tale about a medieval stonemason's encounter with an anachronism, and the effect it has on his culture. It's a gripping story that relates itself seemingly without effort, and therein lies the craft of good writing. Too many of the other stories in this collection labour for effect or fail the "So

What?" question. Stories that rise above this include "A Time For Every Purpose" by Lyn McConchie, a vampire tale that mixes futuristic furniture with Neil Gaiman mythos, and "Outdoors" by Peter Friend. The latter features an intriguing teleportation of the C. S. Lewis kind that had me wanting more, although there's an irritating printing error that has pages 124 and 125 transposed which does spoil the story somewhat. One line in "Celestial Bodies" by Vivienne Plumb did give me a frisson of New Zealand life – "It was hot although it was only October" – but sadly there was little else of local colour in the book.

To read sf anthologies from Canada and New Zealand raises the question of whether their contents are different from the more familiar U.S. and UK writings. Are these two far countries really other planets? On this evidence, I'd say that the feel of the Canadian stories was, on the whole, that of a simpler type of sf. That's not to downgrade it: in fact, the general flavour reminded me of pre-New Wave/"mainstream" literary-influenced sf of the type found in *Galaxy* under Horace Gold's editorship. High praise is due for trying (and sometimes succeeding) to offer this category of sf lamentably missing from too many magazines today. The New Zealand stories were more "literary" in the post-New Wave sense, and the introduction to the collection explains why this should be so. That does make the tone of the New Zealand stories less distinct from much American and British magazine sf.

Nigel Brown

interZone

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BOOKS RECEIVED



SEPTEMBER 1995

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified above. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Aldiss, Brian. **The Secret of This Book: 20-Odd Stories.** Illustrated by Rosamund Chorley and Brian Aldiss. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-225364-X, 334pp, hardcover, cover by Gary Embury, £15.99. (Sf/fantasy collection, first edition; stories plus new interconnecting matter of a meditative, autobiographical sort: most of the tales were first published in original anthologies or magazines, and they include two, "Horse Meat" and "Becoming the Full Butterfly," from *Interzone*.) 2nd October 1995.

Anthony, Patricia. **Happy Policeman.** New English Library, ISBN 0-340-64004-9, 282pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bob Warner, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1994.) 19th October 1995.

Ashley, Mike, ed. **The Merlin Chronicles.** Raven, ISBN 1-85487-332-6, xvii+446pp, B-format paperback, cover by Julek Heller, £5.99. (Arthurian fantasy anthology, first edition; this is the third volume of an ongoing series – its predecessors were *The Pendragon Chronicles*, 1990, and *The Camelot Chronicles*, 1992 – in which Ashley brings together a very wide range of latter-day Arthurian fiction; as before, the book is a mix of old and new, and among the contributors of previously-unpublished stories are Vera Chapman, Robert Holdstock, Phyllis Ann Karr, Tanith Lee, Jessica Amanda Salmonson, Darrell Schweitzer, Peter Valentine Timlett and Peter Tremayne; recommended to all those whose fascination with the figure of Merlin has not been sated by the recent glut of novels from Mary Stewart's to Nikolai Tolstoy's.) 3rd October 1995.

Asimov, Isaac. **Gold: The Final Science Fiction Collection.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-224621-X, 345pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Sf and non-fiction collection, first published in the USA, 1995; Asimov's last book? – possibly; slightly less than half of it consists of previously uncollected fiction from the early 1990s; rather more than half consists of brief essays, mostly *Asimov's SF Magazine* editorials from the 1980s, on the subject of sf writing and sf themes.) 19th October 1995.

Bakker, Robert T. **Raptor Red.** Illustrated by the author. Bantam, ISBN 0-553-10124-2, 246pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Youll,

\$21.95. (Prehistoric sf novel by a noted paleontologist; first edition [?]; this one differs from the British edition, listed here last month, by having a colour frontispiece by Steve Youll and endpaper maps by Bakker; it's not clear which edition has precedence: the UK one may be first.) October 1995.

Ballantyne, Jim. **The Torturer.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05228-7, 239pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first edition; we listed this some time ago, from an advance proof copy, as forthcoming in July 1995, but it was put back a couple of months; "Jim Ballantyne" is a pseudonym for crime novelist Mark Timlin.) 28th September 1995.

Banks, Iain. **Whit; or, Isis Amongst the Unsaved.** Little, Brown, ISBN 0-316-91436-3, 455pp, hardcover, cover by Peter Brown, £15.99. (Non-sf novel by a major sf writer, first edition; it's blurred as "a modern *Pilgrim's Progress*, exploring the techno-ridden vacuity of modern society," and it went straight into the UK hardcover bestseller lists on publication.) Late entry: 29th August publication, received in September 1995.

Barker, Clive. **Clive Barker's Books of Blood, Volume VI.** Warner, ISBN 0-7515-1651-1, 214pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Horror collection, first published in 1985; this is the tenth Sphere/Warner printing, with the film tie-in title *Lord of Illusions* prominent on the cover: said movie is based on "The Last Illusion," a novella herein.) 5th October 1995.

Bethke, Bruce. **Headcrash.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-352-2, 343pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bob Warner, £5.99. (Humorous sf novel, first published in the USA, 1995; this is a debut novel by the man who invented the word "cyberpunk" for a short story written way back in 1981 or thereabouts; here he sends up the sub-genre he inadvertently christened.) 16th November 1995.

Bradley, Marion Zimmer. **Lady of the Trillium.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-225329-1, 291pp, hardcover, cover by Geoff Taylor, £15.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1995; fourth in the "Trillium" series, other parts of which have been written by Julian May and Andre Norton; this volume seems to have been co-authored by one Elisabeth Waters ["my cousin and secretary," according to Bradley], though Waters's name does not appear on the title page.) 19th October 1995.

Burnell, Mark. **Glittering Savages.** New English Library, ISBN 0-340-61783-7, 325pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Avon, £5.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1995.) 19th October 1995.

Canter, Mark. **Ember from the Sun.** Hodder & Stoughton,

ISBN 0-340-64005-7, 330pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1995; a debut book by a new American writer, born 1952; it concerns a Neanderthal girl born 25,000 years after her time; the publishers are marketing it as mainstream and comparing it to Michael Crichton's books.) 19th October 1995.

Clute, John. **Science Fiction: The Illustrated Encyclopedia.** Dorling Kindersley, ISBN 0-7513-0202-3, 312pp, hardcover, £25. (Large-format, colour-illustrated companion to sf, including coverage of books, magazines, authors, films, TV, comics and more; first edition; there have been coffee-table books about sf before now, by James Gunn, Franz Rottensteiner, David Kyle, Robert Holdstock, Brian Ash and others, but this one must take the prize as the best of its sort yet conceived; and the text is entirely different from that of Clute and Nicholls's *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* [1993] – so this is well worth having as a visual supplement to that massive unillustrated volume.) No date shown: probably 3rd October 1995.

Cooper, Louise. **Moonset: The Star Shadow Trilogy, Book III.** Voyager, ISBN 0-586-21725-8, 437pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition.) 23rd October 1995.

Crowther, Peter, ed. **Heaven Sent: An Anthology of Angel Stories.** Introduction by Storm Constantine. Signet/Creed, ISBN 0-45-118445-9, xvii+317pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy anthology, first published in the USA, 1995; Martin H. Greenberg is uncredited co-editor [or, perhaps more accurately, he is the "packager"]; it contains previously unpublished stories by Michael Bishop, the late John Brunner, Charles de Lint, Christopher Evans, Stephen Gallagher, Ed Gorman, Garry Kilworth, Stephen Laws, James Lovegrove, Ian McDonald, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, Ken Wiseman and others; a strong line-up, as always in Pete Crowther's anthologies.) 19th October 1995.

Dalby, Richard, ed. **The Mammoth Book of Victorian and Edwardian Ghost Stories.** Raven, ISBN 1-85487-338-5, xiii+573pp, B-format paperback, £5.99. (Horror anthology, first edition; it contains a scattering of

well-known tales, such as Dickens's "The Signalman" and M. R. James's "The Ash-Tree," mixed in with many more obscure tales; authors include Grant Allen, A. C. Benson, Ambrose Bierce, Robert W. Chambers, William Hope Hodgson, Lafcadio Hearn, Henry James, Sheridan Le Fanu, Dinah Maria Mulock, E. Nesbit, Fitz-James O'Brien, Bram Stoker and Harriet Beecher Stowe; highly recommended, and very good value for money.) 3rd October 1995.

Eddings, David and Leigh. **Belgarath the Sorcerer.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-37324-3, 644pp, hardcover, cover by Laurence Schwinger, \$25.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1995; as in the British edition, Leigh Eddings, David's wife, is credited for the first time on this novel, although a prefatory note states that in fact all past books under the Eddings byline have been collaborations between the two.) Late entry: 30th August publication, received in September 1995.

Etchison, Dennis. **California Gothic.** Raven, ISBN 1-85487-415-2, 216pp, A-format paperback, cover by J. K. Potter, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1995.) 26th September 1995.

Evans, Christopher. **Mortal Remains.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06155-3, 319pp, C-format paperback, cover by Kevin Jenkins, £8.99. (Sf novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition, priced at £15.99 – we listed that several issues ago, on the basis of a proof copy received: the publication date was announced then as 14th September, but it seems to have been put back a few weeks.) 5th October 1995.

Feist, Raymond E. **Rise of a Merchant Prince.** "Volume II of the Serpentwar Saga." Morrow, ISBN 0-688-12409-7, 406pp, hardcover, \$23. (Fantasy novel, first edition [?]; proof copy received; follow-up to *Shadow of a Dark Queen*.) October 1995.

Foot, Michael. **H.G.: The History of Mr Wells.** Doubleday, ISBN 0-385-40366-6, hardcover, £20. (Biography of the great scientific romancer, first edition; this is an amiable book by a former leader of the British Labour Party, designed to defend Wells's reputation as a socialist, a feminist, a humanitarian and a writer against recent attacks [notably from John Carey in *The Intellectuals and the Masses* and Michael Coren in *The Invisible Man: The Life and Liberties of H. G. Wells*, both 1992, who between them painted HGW, monstrously, as some kind of racist and proto-fascist]; one interesting feature is that Foot allows his equal enthusiasm for Jonathan Swift to intrude onto almost every page – Wells, we are told again and again, was Swift's

heir; if so, then most of modern sf must likewise be indebted to Swift: perhaps we should all be re-reading *Gulliver's Travels* [in its unabridged edition] and thinking about this.) 5th October 1995.

Forstchen, William R. **The Gamester Wars: The Alexandrian Ring, The Assassin Gambit, The Napoleon Wager.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-40049-6, 792pp, A-format paperback, cover by Don Dixon and David Mattingly, \$6.99. (Sf omnibus, first edition; the three novels, sf for historical war-gaming enthusiasts, were first published in 1987, 1988 and 1993; Forstchen has gained new fame of late, as the cover reminds us: "Co-author with New Gingrich of 1945.") Late entry: 1st August publication, received in September 1995.

Furey, Maggie. **The Sword of Flame.** "Book Three of The Artefacts of Power." Legend, ISBN 0-09-927091-9, 428pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mick Van Houten, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition.) Late entry: August publication, received in September 1995.

Gier, Scott G. **Genellian: Planet-fall.** "Del Rey Discovery of the Year." Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-39509-3, 460pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bob Eggleton, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; it's an action-adventure planetary romance by a new American writer, born in Hawaii in 1948.) Late entry: 1st August publication, received in September 1995.

Gordon, Frances. **The Devil's Piper.** "In the great tradition of Anne Rice." Headline, ISBN 0-7472-1356-9, 376pp, hardcover, cover by Chris Moore, £16.99. (Horror novel, first edition; "Frances Gordon" is a pseudonym of fantasy writer Bridget Wood.) 26th October 1995.

Griffith, Nicola. **Ammonite.** "Winner of the Lambda and Tip-tree Awards." Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-37891-1, 360pp, A-format paperback, cover by David Stevenson, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1993; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 71.) Late entry: 1st August publication, received in September 1995.

Hamilton, Peter F. **The Reality Dysfunction: Book One of the Night's Dawn Trilogy.** Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-63427-6, 951pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; Hamilton's fourth novel is the biggest space opera we've ever seen.) 26th January 1996.

Hammond, Wayne G., and Christina Scull. **J. R. R. Tolkien: Artist & Illustrator.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-261-10322-9, 208pp, hardcover, £35. (Large-format, colour-illustrated history and critical study of Tolkien's fantasy artwork; first edition; it reproduces some 200 pictures by the

great man, "over half published for the first time.") 19th October 1995.

Harman, Andrew. **Fahrenheit 666.** Legend, ISBN 0-09-949891-X, 307pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mick Posen, £4.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition.) Late entry: August publication, received in September 1995.

Hawkes-Moore, Julia. **Dancing in Circles.** Honno [Ailsa Craig, Heol y Cawl, Dinas Powys, S. Glamorgan CF6 4AH], ISBN 1-870206-15-0, 215pp, small-press paperback, cover by Penni Bestic, £6.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a debut novel by a new British writer; this small-press is supported by the Arts Council of Wales, and the book has a cover commendation by Fay Weldon; it is distributed by Turnaround, 27 Horsell Rd., London N5 1XL.) 5th October 1995.

Holder, Nancy. **Dead in the Water.** Dell/Abyss, ISBN 0-440-21481-5, 413pp, A-format paperback, \$4.99. (Horror novel, first edition; winner of the 1995 Bram Stoker Award for best novel; a first solo horror novel by an author who has written many short stories, as well as romantic novels under various pseudonyms and a mainstream Hollywood novel, *Rough Cut*; this American paperback has been sent to us by Robinson Publishing/Raven, who are planning a UK edition for release on 7th November at £4.99.) Late entry: June 1994 publication, received in September 1995.

Howard, Robin G. **Jim Long—Space Agent: Ancient Ones of Light.** Excalibur Press [4-6 Effie Rd., London SW6 1TD], ISBN 1-85634-334-0, 183pp, small-press paperback, £7.95. (Sf novel, first edition; a debut book by a new British writer, born 1939.) Late entry: 1994 publication, received in September 1995.

Jones, Stephen, ed. **The Best New Horror: Volume Six.** Raven, ISBN 1-85487-421-7, xi+448pp, B-format paperback, cover by Luis Rey, £6.99. (Horror anthology, first edition; it contains reprint stories by Robert Bloch, Ramsey Campbell, Harlan Ellison, Esther Friesner, Charles Grant, M. John Harrison, Garry Kilworth, Paul J. McAuley, Ian MacLeod, Elizabeth Massie, Kim Newman, Nicholas Royle, Lawrence Watt-Evans and others.) 3rd October 1995.

Kilworth, Garry D. **Archangel.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05768-8, 254pp, A-format paperback, cover by Peter Mennim, £5.99. (Horror/sf novel, first published in 1994; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 93.) 12th October 1995.

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Kurtz, Katherine. **The Bastard Prince: Volume III in The Heirs of Saint Camber.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-39177-2, xi+433pp, A-format paperback, cover by Edwin Herder, \$5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1994.) Late entry: 1st August publication, received in September 1995.

1995.

Lackey, Mercedes. **Sacred Ground.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648034-9, 381pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1994; the author is "adept at dark and high fantasy," according to the blurb; this one, about Native American tribal magic, is in her "dark" rather than "high" mode.) 23rd October 1995.

Lackey, Mercedes. **Storm Warning: Book One of The Mage Storms.** Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-297-5, 403pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mick Posen, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1994.) 4th September 1995.

Laws, Stephen. **Macabre.** New English Library, ISBN 0-450-60691-0, 439pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jon Blake, £5.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1994.) 19th October 1995.

Lethem, Jonathan. **Amnesia Moon: A Road Movie.** New English Library, ISBN 0-340-63224-0, 249pp, A-format paperback, cover by Chris Brown, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1995; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 100.) 19th October 1995.

Lumley, Brian. **Necroscope: The Lost Years, Volume I.** Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-64961-5, 483pp, hardcover, cover by George Underwood, £16.99. (Horror novel, first edition; first in a new diptych which "fills a gap" in the author's previous "Necroscope" series.) 5th October 1995.

Mercer, David. **Stillborn.** "A story about reincarnation." Shark Books [Mistral Publishing, 43 St Mary's Rd., Bodmin, PL31 1NG], ISBN 1-898816-00-X, 252pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition [?]; for some reason, it states "copyright 1991" inside, although there is no other indication that the book has been published previously; this David Mercer is not the famous playwright of that name, but a new British writer, born 1945; three other books of his are advertised as forthcoming in the next year.) 1st September 1995.

Moorcock, Michael. **Hawkmooon.** "The Tale of the Eternal Champion, Vol. 3." Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-437-4, 646pp, A-format

paperback, cover by Yoshitaka Amano, £5.99. (Fantasy omnibus, first published in 1992; it contains the novels *The Jewel in the Skull*, *The Mad God's Amulet*, *The Sword of the Dawn* and *The Runestaff*, all first published in 1967-69.) 23rd October 1995.

Morris, Mark. **The Secret of Anatomy.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-649043-3, 610pp, A-format paperback, no price shown. (Horror novel, first published in 1994; proof copy received.) January 1996.

Rohan, Michael Scott. **The Lord of Middle Air.** Gollancz/VGSF, ISBN 0-575-06099-9, 253pp, A-format paperback, cover by Ian Miller, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1994.) 12th October 1995.

Saul, John. **The Homing.** Ballantine/Fawcett Crest, ISBN 0-449-22379-5, 423pp, A-format paperback, \$6.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1994; a John Saul Fan Club is advertised in the rear: PO Box 17035, Seattle, WA 98107, USA.) Late entry: 1st August publication, received in September 1995.

Schweitzer, Darrell. **The Mask of the Sorcerer.** New English Library, ISBN 0-340-64003-0, 421pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mike Van Houten, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; it comes with praise from Gene Wolfe, Tanith Lee and Morgan Llywelyn; the last of these describes the book as "one of the ten best fantasy novels of the past generation ... unique as all great creations are unique"; nevertheless, it seems to have been unable to find an American publisher, and this UK paperback-original is the world first; the two Schweitzer short stories published in *Interzone* in the past year are related to this book [though they were not extracts].) 19th October 1995.

Sheffield, Charles. **The Ganymede Club.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85662-8, 352pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; sequel to *Cold as Ice*; proof copy received.) December 1995.

Simmons, Dan. **Endymion.** Bantam, ISBN 0-553-10020-3, 468pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Sf novel, first edition; sequel to *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion*; proof copy received.) January 1996.

Stine, R. L. **Halloween Night II.** Point Horror, ISBN 0-590-13180-X, 178pp, A-format paperback, £3.50. (Young-adult horror novel, first published in the USA, 1994; R. L. Stine is said to be one of America's bestselling authors on the basis of books such as this.) No date shown: received in September 1995.

Taylor, Roger. **Ibryen.** Headline, ISBN 0-7472-1430-1, 407pp, hardcover, cover by Mark Harrison, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition.) 5th October 1995.

Thomas, Sue. **Water**. Five Leaves Publications [PO Box 81, Nottingham NG5 4ER], ISBN 0-907123-51-1, 162pp, small-press paperback, £7.99. (Fantasy [?] novel, first published in the USA, 1994; Thomas's second novel, following her sf outing, *Correspondence*.) 5th October 1995.

Tohill, Cathal, and Pete Tombs. **Immoral Tales: Sex and Horror Cinema in Europe, 1956-1984**. Titan, ISBN 1-85286-661-6, 272pp, very large-format paperback, £14.99. (Illustrated guide to European erotic horror films, first published in 1994; it was originally issued by an outfit called Primitive Press, though we don't know whether they are British or Ameri-

This is a list of all books received that fall into those sub-types of sf, fantasy and horror which may be termed novelizations, recursive fictions, spinoffs, sequels by other hands, shared worlds and sharecrops (including non-fiction about shared worlds, films and TV, etc.). The collective term "Spinoffery" is used for the sake of brevity.

Collins, Max Allan. **Waterworld**. Arrow, ISBN 0-09-963831-2, 239pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf movie novelization, first published in the USA, 1995; it's based on [or "upon" as they insist in saying in film credit-speak] a screenplay by [or "written by"] Marc Norman, which in turn was based on ideas [or "material"] by Peter Rader and Peter Twohy.) Late entry: August publication, received in September 1995.

Hinton, Craig. **Millennial Rites**. "Doctor Who: The Missing Adventures." Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 0-426-20455-7, 311pp, A-format paperback, cover by Alistair Pearson, £4.99. (Sf television-series spinoff novel, first edition.) No date shown: October (?) 1995.

Howe, David J., and Mark Stammers. **Doctor Who: Companions**. Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 1-85227-582-0, 124pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Large-format illustrated companion to the *Doctor Who* television series, dealing with all the Doctor's sidekicks; first edition.) No date shown; received in September 1995.

Jeter, K. W. **Blade Runner 2: The Edge of Human**. Orion, ISBN 1-85798-265-7, 340pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Sf novel, a sequel by another hand to Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*; first published in the USA, 1995; this is described as being a sequel both to Dick's novel and to the film based on it, *Blade Runner*.) 9th October 1995.

Kalogridis, Jeanne. **Children of the Vampire**. "The Diaries of the Family Dracul." Headline, ISBN 0-7472-1378-X, 209pp, hardcover, cover by Keith Scaife, £16.99. (Hor-

ror; the book focuses on "key directors Rollin, Franco, Borowczyk, Benazeraf, Larraz and Robbe-Grillet.") 16th November 1995.

Warrington, Freda. **A Dance in Blood Velvet**. Pan, ISBN 0-330-32662-7, 584pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in 1994; reviewed by Brian Stableford in *Interzone* 90.) 13th October 1995.

Warrington, Freda. **The Dark Blood of Poppies: A Vampire Fantasy**. Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-63732-1, 519pp, hardcover, £16.99.

BOOKS RECEIVED



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first published in 1994.) 23rd October 1995.

White, Michael. **Asimov: The Unauthorized Life**. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-605-9, 257pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Biography of the leading sf writer who died in 1992; first published in 1994; this

(Horror/fantasy novel, first edition; sequel to *A Dance in Blood Velvet*.) 13th October 1995.

Wells, Angus. **Lords of the Sky**. "A fabulous dragon epic." Millennium, ISBN

1-85798-400-5, 679pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mick Posen, £5.99. (Fantasy novel,

SPINOFFERY

ror novel, first published in the USA [?], 1995; the second in a trilogy which prequelizes Bram Stoker's *Dracula*; Jeanne Kalogridis is the said to be real name of an author who has been published widely under a pseudonym.) 12th October 1995.

Leonard, Paul. **Toy Soldiers**. "The New Doctor Who Adventures." Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 0-426-20452-2, 244pp, A-format paperback, cover by Peter Elson, £4.99. (Sf television-series spinoff novel, first edition.) No date shown: September (?) 1995.

Lyons, Steve. **Head Games**. "The New Doctor Who Adventures." Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 0-426-20454-9, 258pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bill Donohoe, £4.99. (Sf television-series spinoff novel, first edition.) No date shown: October (?) 1995.

McKinney, Jack. **The Sentinels: The Devil's Hand, Dark Powers, Death Dance**. "Robotech." Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-38901-8, vii+467pp, A-format paperback, \$5.99. (Sf spinoff omnibus, first edition; the three novels were all first published in 1988 and are copyright "Harmony Gold U.S.A., Inc., and Tatsunoko Production Co. Ltd."; "Jack McKinney" is the shared pseudonym of Brian Daley and James Luceno, who have both written film novelizations and much else.) Late entry: 1st August publication, received in September 1995.

Marley, Stephen. **Managra**. "Doctor Who: The Missing Adventures." Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 0-426-20453-0, 329pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Campbell, £4.99. (Sf television-series spinoff novel, first edition; this is a first "Doctor Who" novel by established fantasy writer Marley – but he has previously written a couple of "Judge Dredd" spinoff titles [not received by us].) No date shown: September (?) 1995.

Navarro, Yvonne. **Species**. Bantam, ISBN 0-553-50389-8, 279pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf/horror movie novelization, first published in the USA, 1995; based on a screenplay by Dennis Feldman, it includes eight pages of photographs.) 5th October 1995.

Rogers, Dave. **The Ultimate Avengers**. Bantam, ISBN 0-7522-1010-6, 350pp, C-format paperback, £16.99. (Illustrated companion to the sf/fantasy TV thriller series of the 1960s and 70s; first edition; it's a much reworked and enlarged version of an earlier book called *The Complete Avengers*.) 19th October 1995.

Vaz, Mark Cotta, and Shinji Hata. **The Star Wars Archives: Props, Costumes, Models and Artwork from Star Wars**. "Includes the Indiana Jones Archives." Virgin, ISBN 1-85227-587-1, 208pp, hardcover, £19.99. (Large-format illustrated companion to the hardware, props, etc., featured in George Lucas's sf/fantasy films; first published in the USA as *From Star Wars to Indiana Jones: The Best of the Lucasfilm Archives*, 1995.) No date shown; received in September 1995.

Vornholt, John. **Blood Oath**. "Babylon 5, Book #3." Bantam, ISBN 0-7522-0654-0, 232pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf television-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1995; inspired by the Warner Bros. TV series created by J. Michael Straczynski.) 19th October 1995.

Walton, Barbara E. **Odyssey**. "Quantum Leap." Bantam, ISBN 0-7522-0687-7, 280pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf television-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1995; inspired by the Universal TV series created by Donald P. Bellisario.) 19th October 1995.

book by a British science journalist had poor reviews, mainly on the grounds that it skips over a long career in the space of a couple of hundred pages; but, judged as a lightweight quickie, it seems readable enough.) 4th September 1995.

Williamson, Jack. **The Humanoids**. Tor/Orb, ISBN 0-312-85253-3, 303pp, trade paperback, \$13.95. (Sf novel, first published in 1949; this edition also includes the related short story, "With Folded Hands"; proof copy received.) January 1996.

Wright, T. M. **Erthmun**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05872-2, 252pp, A-format paperback, cover by Danny Flynn, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA 1994.) 12th October 1995.

Williams, Tad. **Caliban's Hour**. Illustrated by the author. Legend, ISBN 0-09-926171-5, 180pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bruce Pennington, £4.99. (Fantasy novella, first published in 1994; a sequel by another hand to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 95.) 21st September 1995.

Editor's Note:

When we began this separate section headed "Spinoffery" we expected that it would consist in the main of film novelizations (as opposed to television, comic-book and other sorts of spinoff). Surprisingly, the two movie novelizations listed above, Collins's *Waterworld* and Navarro's *Species*, are the only two we have received so far this year (apart from a reprint of Robert Holdstock's *The Emerald Forest*). Indeed, we received only two during the whole of 1994: Geary Gravel's *Batman: The Animated Movie* (Bantam) and James Luceno's *The Shadow* (Arrow). Does this mean that sf, fantasy and horror film novelizations are thinner on the ground than we thought? Perhaps so, but on checking we discover that quite a few have not been sent to us for review. In addition to the four just mentioned, relevant movie novelizations published during the past two years (since we ran a lengthy bibliography of them in *Interzone* 80), include: *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* by Leonore Fleischer (Pan), *The Mask* by Steve Perry (Bantam), *The Pagemaster* by Todd Strasser (Puffin), *Star Trek: Generations* by J. M. Dillard (Pocket), *Johnny Mnemonic* by Terry Bisson (HarperCollins; possibly delayed), *Judge Dredd* by Neal Barrett, Jr. (Bantam), *Outbreak* by Robert Tine (Signet) and *Tank Girl* by Martin Millar (Signet). Possibly there was also a novelization of *Batman Forever*, but we can find no record of it.

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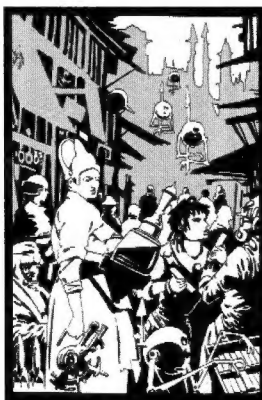
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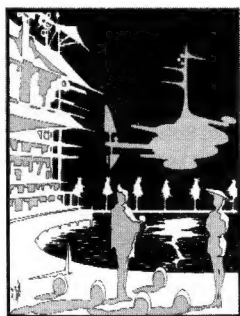
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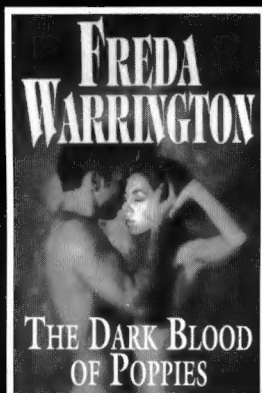
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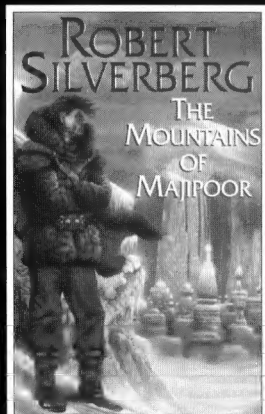
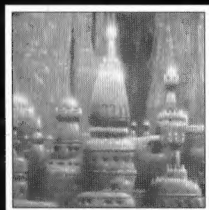


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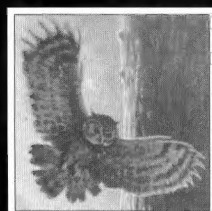
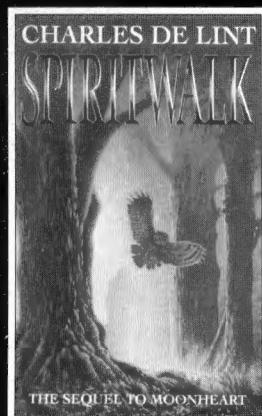
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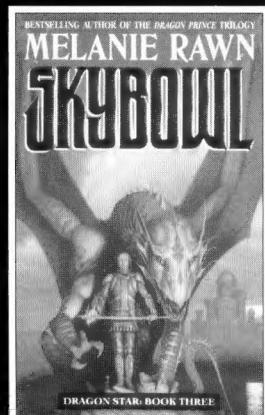
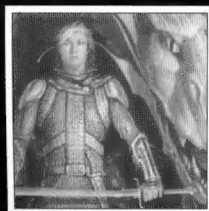
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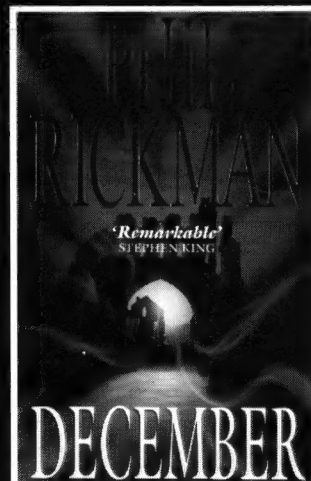
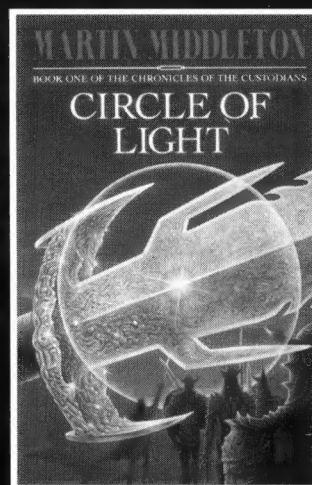
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